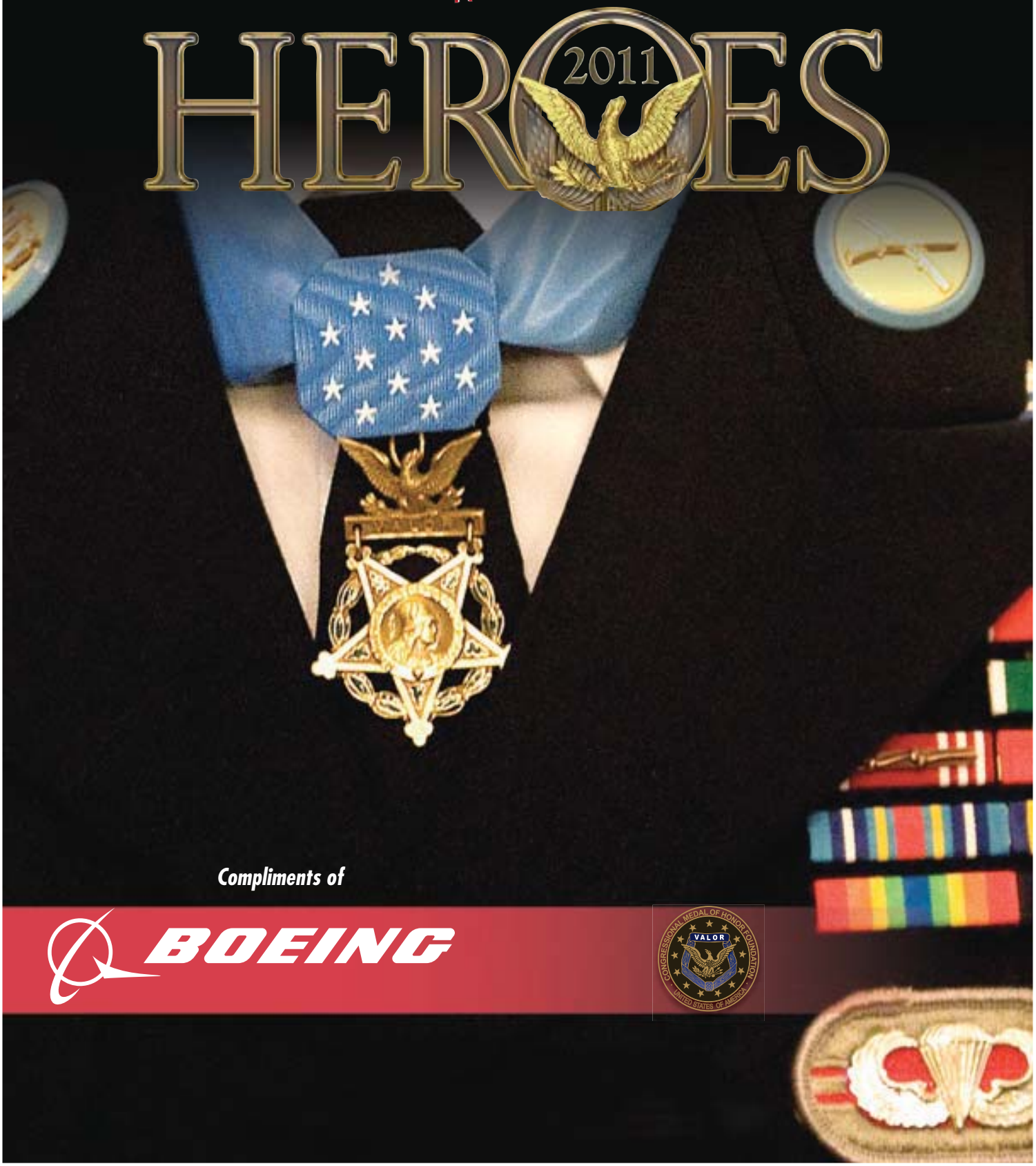
A NATION HONORS VALOR IN THE WAR ON TERROR

STARS AND STRIPES®

HEROES 2011



Compliments of

BOEING

Taking time to salute the 1 percent

After nearly a decade of war, it's easy to become numb to it.

You read the newspaper, you watch the television and it just keeps coming, one day after another until it all runs together. You mourn the dead and you celebrate the victories, but you can't allow yourself to feel too deeply or it becomes too much. If you're one of the 99 percent of Americans not actively fighting this country's battles, war is difficult to understand.

But we must try. We owe it to the 1 percent.

For them, it's not complicated. It's not about surges and drawdowns and Capitol Hill bickering. For the men and women who will lace up their boots in Afghanistan or Iraq today, their only goal is to complete the mission and lie down to sleep at night one day closer to coming home.

It's not easy. Sometimes completing an ordinary mission requires extraordinary heroism. These are the stories you'll find in the seventh edition of Stars and Stripes' Heroes special section.

The servicemembers profiled here never sought glory. Though many later received valor medals, they sought only to succeed and survive and to protect the one standing beside them. Most of them made it home safely, some didn't. Others are still at war today.

To understand, we must know their stories.

We owe it to the 1 percent.

— Derek Turner, Heroes editor

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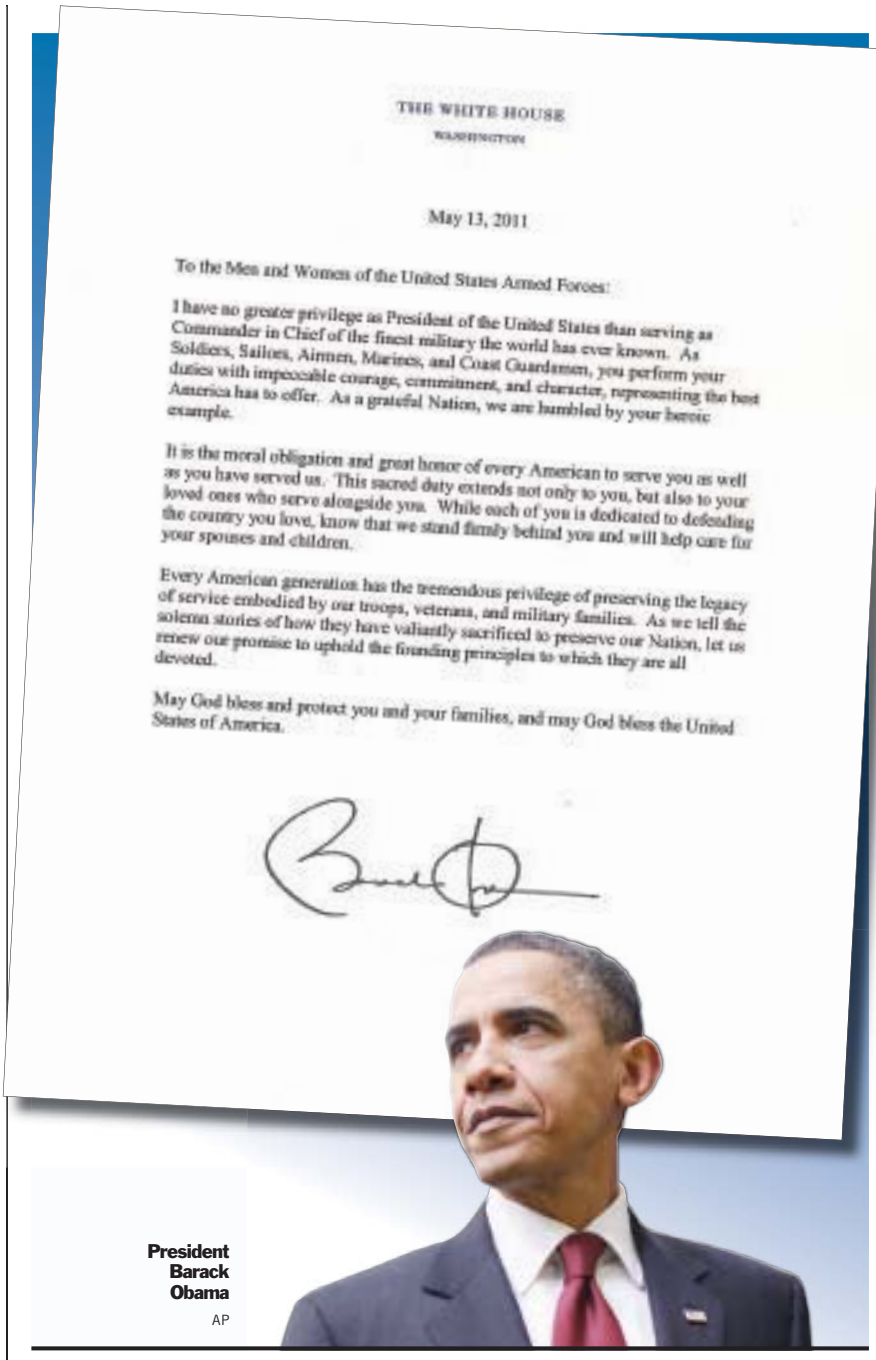

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

May 13, 2011

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

I have no greater privilege as President of the United States than serving as Commander in Chief of the finest military the world has ever known. As Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen, you perform your duties with impeccable courage, commitment, and character, representing the best America has to offer. As a grateful Nation, we are humbled by your heroic example.

It is the moral obligation and great honor of every American to serve you as well as you have served us. This sacred duty extends not only to you, but also to your loved ones who serve alongside you. While each of you is dedicated to defending the country you love, know that we stand firmly behind you and will help care for your spouses and children.

Every American generation has the tremendous privilege of preserving the legacy of service embodied by our troops, veterans, and military families. As we tell the solemn stories of how they have valiantly sacrificed to preserve our Nation, let us renew our promise to uphold the founding principles to which they are all devoted.

May God bless and protect you and your families, and may God bless the United States of America.

President Barack Obama
AP

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THANKS TO ALL WHO DEFEND THE FLAG OF FREEDOM.
BOEING

WASHINGTON

Men of honor

Heroes share similar stories, meet different fates

The White House awarded three Medals of Honor last year. You probably only remember one.

The first, awarded in September, went to Vietnam War hero Richard Etchberger, killed in action in 1968. The decades between his selfless sacrifice and his family's receipt of the award understandably muted the attention his story received.

The third, awarded in November, went to Staff Sgt. Salvatore Giunta, the first living recipient from the current wars.

The ceremony during which the Afghan war hero accepted his medal was one of the most heavily covered events of the year by the White House media. That was followed by dozens of national TV interviews, spots on late-night talk shows, invitations to parades and the Super Bowl, and a media blitz that Giunta himself has called overwhelming.

In between those two, the White House awarded the nation's highest military honor to Staff Sgt. Robert Miller, a 24-year-old special operations soldier whose heroic story parallels that of Giunta. Both men were experienced warfighters on their second tour in Afghanistan. Both were ambushed in the mountains of Kunar province. Both ran directly into enemy fire to save others.

Giunta received his Medal of Honor for bounding across an open field to stop two enemy fighters from dragging away a wounded U.S. soldier. Miller received his for exposing himself to direct fire to distract dozens of enemy fighters so his fellow soldiers could fall back into safer cover.

The biggest difference in Giunta's and Miller's stories is that Miller's heroics cost him his life.

His White House ceremony was a somber event that received significant attention for a day or two, then faded away. His family opted not to do media interviews. His story is far less well known than Giunta's, at least outside of the Army community.

"I've had guys say it seems like since Robbie wasn't alive, that Sal's story trumped his, and that's a shame," said Maj. Bob Cusick, Miller's team leader the day he was killed. "But I don't see it that way. In the end, they're both heroes. Nothing changes that."

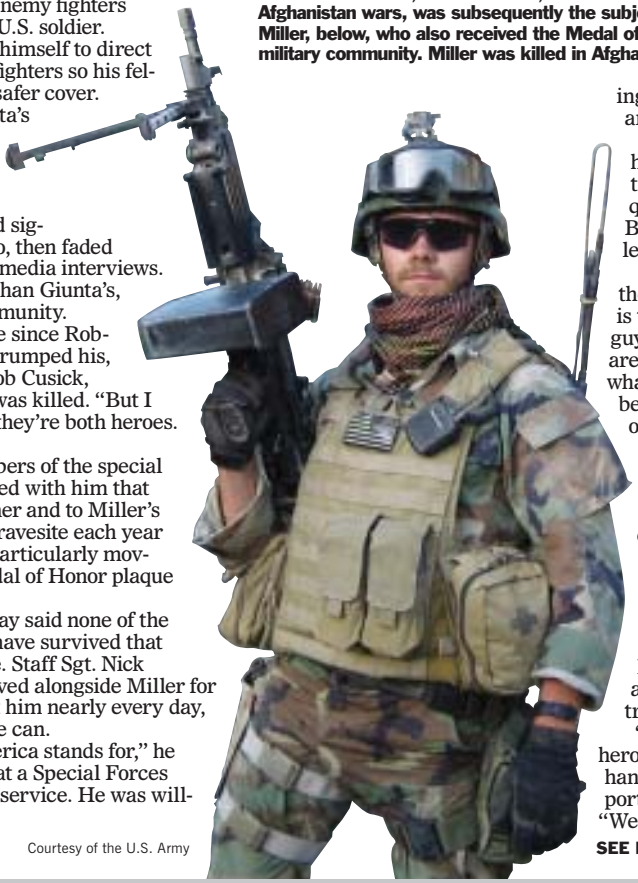
Cusick said he and other members of the special operations detachment who served with him that day have stayed close to each other and to Miller's family, traveling to his Florida gravesite each year since 2008. Their last visit was particularly moving, since they got to see his Medal of Honor plaque installed on his headstone.

Soldiers who were there that day said none of the 21 U.S. or Afghan troops would have survived that attack if not for Miller's sacrifice. Staff Sgt. Nick McGarry, a close friend who served alongside Miller for three years, said he thinks about him nearly every day, and shares his story whenever he can.

"He's an example of what America stands for," he said. "He was the epitome of what a Special Forces soldier is, the epitome of selfless service. He was willing to do everything and anything for those soldiers around him."

AP

President Barack Obama presents the Medal of Honor to Staff Sgt. Salvatore Giunta at the White House on Nov. 16, 2010. Giunta, the first living Medal of Honor recipient from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, was subsequently the subject of a media blitz. The story of Staff Sgt. Robert Miller, below, who also received the Medal of Honor last year, isn't as well known outside the military community. Miller was killed in Afghanistan in 2008.



Courtesy of the U.S. Army

Cusick, now an instructor at Fort Bragg, said he's more reluctant to share his reflections on that day, because of his own lingering "what if" questions about how Miller could have been saved. But he does incorporate Miller's heroism into his lessons.

"I tell them the big takeaway is that there are guys out there who are willing to do whatever needs to be done to help out their brothers," he said. "There are heroes in every unit, ready to go."

■ For more photos of Giunta and Miller, as well as video of their ceremonies, go to **stripes.com/heroes/moh**

That's the same message that Giunta has been emphasizing since he received his award.

The 26-year old Italy-based soldier announced earlier this year that he would leave the Army this summer, and attend college in Colorado. For the last few months, he's shied away from much of the public attention initially showered on him.

But, in numerous media interviews, Giunta has made it clear that he doesn't see his Medal of Honor as a reflection of his heroism, but instead as a symbol of the selfless service of all U.S. troops in harm's way.

"There are so many others that are the unsung heroes of this war who will never come back to a handshake, or a hug from their families," he told reporters following his White House award ceremony. "We have to take the time to remember them."

SEE MEN ON PAGE 6

By Leo Shane III/Stars and Stripes | shanel@stripes.osd.mil | Twitter: @LeoShane

OUTSIDE GOWARDESH, AFGHANISTAN — JAN. 25, 2008

Soldier's sacrifice helped ambushed squad reach cover

Staff Sgt. Robert Miller
Medal of Honor

On Jan. 25, 2008, Staff Sgt. Robert Miller's patrol of 22 U.S. and Afghan soldiers was ambushed outside Gowardesh by a force of 120 enemy fighters. Troops there said Miller bore the brunt of the attack, then drew even more fire in an effort to help his men drop back to safety.

Even after being shot through both sides of his chest, he continued to return fire and toss grenades at the enemy, until his bold counterattack cost him his life.

Miller's team had been conducting combat reconnaissance patrols near Gowardesh, a hostile region in eastern Afghanistan where 18 months earlier Sgt. 1st Class Jared Monti earned a Medal of Honor after losing his life while trying to save a fallen comrade.

As the team approached a recently bombed compound for a battle assessment, they marched into a snow-covered, narrow valley where enemy fighters had set up an ambush.

One hid behind a boulder until Miller was less than five meters away, then opened fire. Witnesses said Miller killed that man instantly, but the noise signaled others hidden along the valley walls to begin their assault.

Heavy fire from above pinned down the U.S. troops, so Miller began charging enemy positions on the mountainside. Teammates said the constant bright flashes from Miller's squad automatic weapon made him the prime target for the insurgents, so he pushed forward while ordering others take cover.

The move let the rest of the squad retreat and regroup, but it also left the 24-year-old fighting in the open nearly half a football field away from his team.

Fellow soldiers said he charged one insurgent machine gun position and killed five fighters. He tossed grenades into two others, and continued peppering ambush positions with gunfire before attempting to take cover.

As he moved, an insurgent shot Miller through his right side, finding an area not covered by body armor. Critically wounded, Miller returned fire and killed the man.

Witnesses told Army investigators that the rocket-propelled grenade and small-arms fire hitting around Miller was so intense that they could not see him, only dirt and snow being kicked up from the ground.

Miller kept shouting information on enemy positions over the radio, but was struck by a second bullet under his left arm. Despite efforts to save him, he died before his teammates could evacuate him from the fight.

Army officials credited Miller with killing at least 16 insurgents and wounding 30 others. His family was presented his Medal of Honor in October.

— Leo Shane III

KORENGAL VALLEY, AFGHANISTAN — OCT. 25, 2007

A 'bittersweet' honor

Spc. Salvatore Giunta
Medal of Honor

On Oct. 25, 2007, Spc. Salvatore Giunta's squad was ambushed by insurgents while on a mission in the Korengal Valley, where his unit had been engaged in constant combat with enemy fighters for months.

As his unit walked single file along the crest of ridge just before daybreak, hidden gunmen unleashed an L-shaped ambush on the men, sending them diving for cover.

Giunta recounted the scene in vivid detail in Sebastian Junger's book "War," saying the area was "just rows of tracers, RPGs, everything happening out of nowhere with no real idea of how it [expletive] happened."

In the initial moments of the firefight, he ventured out into the uncovered battlefield, exposing himself to even more danger, to pull one comrade to safety.

Giunta was hit twice by bullets, but his protective gear saved him both times. He and two other soldiers regrouped as bullets rained down around them. They inched toward the enemy positions and starting lobbing grenades at them, trying to get the entire squad back together.

But they quickly realized that one man — Sgt. Joshua Brennan, one of Giunta's closest friends — was missing.

Soldiers from the squad said Giunta threw his last grenade and sprinted across the open battlefield to where Brennan should have been, exposing himself to another barrage of enemy fire. When he got there, he saw two enemy fighters dragging his friend down a hill.

Without hesitation, Giunta ran after them. From just a few feet away he fired his M4 at the would-be-kidnappers, killing one insurgent and wounding the other. As the wounded man fled, Giunta grabbed his friend and hauled him back to the rest of the team.

He and the rest of the team provided medical aid to Brennan until a medevac could be brought in. Brennan was alive when the helicopter left, but he died before reaching base. Another teammate, Spc. Hugo Mendoza, also was killed in the firefight.

Giunta, now a staff sergeant, received his Medal of Honor for heroism in November. After the ceremony, he called the award a "bittersweet" honor.

"Because of this day, I lost two dear friends of mine," he told reporters. "I would give this back in a second to have those friends here with me now."

— Leo Shane III

WASHINGTON

Military's top award turns 150

When the Medal of Honor was first proposed in 1861, Army officials hated the idea. General-in-Chief of the Army Winfield Scott and others said such uniform decorations were against the spirit of the service, an unnecessary distraction for soldiers fighting wars.

Today, 150 years later, the medal has become the American symbol for valor and sacrifice, the most revered award that any servicemember or veteran can wear. It's one of only a few military traditions as well known by civilians as it is among troops fighting on the front lines, and the only one to be awarded personally by the commander-in-chief.

Only about 3,400 Medals of Honor have been awarded since the Civil War, putting those heroes in an elite fraternity.

Stars and Stripes

World War II hero Audie Murphy not only received the Medal of Honor, but he starred in the movie about his exploits, 1955's "To Hell and Back." The Medal of Honor is well known by civilians and troops alike.

The first was awarded to Pvt. Jacob Parrott, one of the few survivors of a daring 1861 Union Army raid 200 miles inside Confederate territory to disrupt rail lines in Georgia. The most recent heroism to warrant the award came from Army Spc. Salvatore Giunta, who ran through a hail of Taliban fire in the mountains of Afghanistan to stop a fallen soldier from being abducted.

In between, the stories of the medal recipients read like plotlines for Hollywood blockbusters: heroic battlefield charges, selfless sacrifice to save fellow soldiers, inspired leadership amid death and destruction. In fact, several of those stories have become mainstream movies.

"Black Hawk Down" includes the true stories of Army Master Sgt. Gary Gordon and Sgt. 1st Class Randall Shughart, awarded the honor posthumously for their heroics in Somalia in 1993. "We Were Soldiers" included stories of three Medal of Honor recipients from the Vietnam War. "To Hell and Back" not only featured the life of World War II hero Audie Murphy, it also starred him.

One reason the esteem of the medal has grown over the decades is that so few have

SEE 150 ON PAGE 6

By Jeff Schogol and Leo Shane III
Stars and Stripes

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OUTSIDE GOWARDESH, AFGHANISTAN JAN. 25, 2008

'It was the hardest decision'

Under intense fire during an ambush launched by more than 100 enemy fighters, Army Staff Sgt. Javier Mackey was faced with a choice: abandon the body of a fallen comrade or risk his life and that of another servicemember trying to carry it to safety. Mackey's Special Forces team had been ambushed outside Gowardesh, Afghanistan. Staff Sgt. Robert Miller had been killed providing life-saving covering fire for the rest of the team.

Mackey and Air Force Staff Sgt. Robert Gutierrez were trying to drag Miller's body out of the kill zone, but they were stopped by a hailstorm of enemy fire. Mackey and Gutierrez weighed their options. Ultimately, it fell to Mackey to decide.

Staff Sgt. Javier Mackey
Bronze Star with "V"

"It was the hardest decision that I had to make," said Mackey, now a sergeant first class.

On Jan. 25, 2008, Mackey was with a 12-man Special Forces team along with 23 U.S. and Afghan troops on a night raid when it fought a skirmish with enemy fighters.

After the shooting stopped, the team walked into a valley to assess enemy casualties. The farther they walked, the steeper the mountainside, the narrower the footpath.

Then came a primal scream: "Allahu akbar!" An ambush.

The screaming insurgent raised up and opened fire, but he was immediately cut down by Miller.

Then more insurgents began shooting. And still more after that.

Miller, at the front of the U.S. line, put up a ferocious defense. But sizing up the situation, he yelled "Break contact," signaling the others to withdraw back down the mountainside.

Mackey kept up fire, waiting to follow Miller out of the ambush. But he never arrived. Finally, Mackey stopped shooting and looked for Miller, only to discover that he'd been shot.

Mackey and Gutierrez ran to Miller.

"We get to Robbie's body, and he's on his last …," Mackey said, overwhelmed, his voice trailing off.

Mackey started treating Miller, but an insurgent trained his sights on Mackey and pulled the trigger. Body armor stopped the round.

"The guy shot me and he stopped and he looked at me and Rob Gutierrez like, 'Why in the hell are you guys not dead? I know hit both of you, or I know at least I hit the big black guy that's right in front of me.'" Mackey said. "We both drew our weapons at the same time, and it was kind of like something out of a movie, and we nonchalantly just shot and killed this guy."

Miller didn't pull through. In an effort to allow his comrades to escape, Miller had isolated himself in an open area, drawing so much fire that the dust and rocks and snow kicked up around him until his teammates could no longer see him. During the barrage, two bullets pierced his side in areas left vulnerable by his body armor.

His death left Mackey and Gutierrez in a perilous position, weighing the ancient military tenet of "leave no man behind" versus the very real possibility of one body becoming three.

With rounds whizzing by, Mackey and Gutierrez argued about leaving Miller until they could come back with reinforcements. As the ranking soldier, Mackey made the call.

"I'm like, 'Hey man, if we don't leave Robbie here, we're both gonna die and then now we got people behind us that have to come and get us,'" Mackey recounted.

The two managed to link up with the rest of the team and Mackey told his teammates the location of Miller's body, insisting they go back for him at the first opportunity.

"At this point, I'm full of tears because I didn't bring him back," Miller said. "I feel like such a huge failure for not being able to pull his body back."

But Mackey was ordered to escort one of his wounded teammates to a hospital. Eventually, Gutierrez and other team members recovered Miller's body.

Mackey, who was awarded the Bronze Star with "V," said it took him a while to come to terms with Miller's death.

"If I could go back and make things better, I would," he said. "I used to beat myself up, because I was like, 'Had I been there two seconds sooner, could I have saved his life?' Or, 'Maybe I didn't apply his chest seal right.' … I second-guessed a lot of the things I did, but in the end, whatever happened happened, and there's nothing I can do to change it."

By Jeff Schogol/Stars and Stripes | jeffrey.schogol@stripes.osd.mil | Twitter: @JeffSchogol

Men: Giunta a reluctant spokesman

FROM PAGE 4

Giunta's teammates hail him as a hero for his actions, but also describe him as a reluctant spokesman because of his humility and his desire not to be placed above other soldiers.

"I think he doesn't want to be in the limelight, but I think he sees that this country is in need of somebody to look up to right now, and he can be that inspiration for people," said Sgt. Brett Perry, who served alongside Giunta in Afghanistan. "I think it's for the good of the country, and I think he's going to step up and be that person for people to look up to."

Only two other men have received the Medal of Honor for actions in Afghanistan, both posthumously: Army Sgt. 1st Class Jared Monti and Navy Lt. Michael Murphy. Four others have received the honor for actions in Iraq, all of whom were killed performing their heroic acts.

Cusick said he has followed Giunta's story closely, in part because of the similarity to Miller's story, and in part because they received their medals just a month apart.

"I'm proud of him, like I'm proud of Robbie," he said. "It's not all about who gets the most attention. [Miller] is a hero. And we're proud to talk about him any chance we get."

150: Only eight Medals of Honor awarded from current wars

FROM PAGE 5

been given, said retired Air Force Col. Leo Thorsness, president of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society. Only eight have been awarded for the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Giunta is the only living recipient.

Nearly 250 were awarded for heroism during the Vietnam War. Lawmakers have repeatedly questioned whether Pentagon leaders have made the honor more exclusive in recent years, but military officials say that the nature of the current wars — indirect combat, better equipment — is the reason for fewer medals.

Retired Army Col. Jack Jacobs said former U.S. Sen. Bob Kerrey once told him the award is so difficult to be nominated for because "You have to do something; people have to see it; they have to be able to write; and they can't hate you." Both men received the honor for actions in Vietnam.

■ For more on the history of the Medal of Honor, go to **stripes.com/heroes/moh150**

"He was being at least partially facetious, but he's absolutely correct," Jacobs said. "Think of all people who performed valorously and nobody saw it, or people saw it and they themselves were killed and there was nobody left to bear witness."

As a result, Jacobs said he believes the few Medal of Honor recipients represent the valor of millions of others whose service went unrecognized. Giunta, in his public comments, said he accepted his medal not because he feels worthy to wear it, but to honor all the troops serving in the current wars.

Army Lt. Col. Harold A. Fritz, who was awarded the Medal of Honor during the Vietnam War, said he has never seen the award as a symbol of personal accomplishment; but instead a recognition of all men and women who have served in battle.

"I don't wear it for myself," he said. "I don't wear it to be in the spotlight."

Still, the spotlight can be hard to avoid for Medal of Honor recipient. For former Marine Hershel W. Williams, that means he has to live his life to a higher standard.

Williams, who was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions on Iwo Jima, has been careful to avoid doing anything that could tarnish the award, and that includes not endorsing products or using his stature for political purposes. It all goes back to what the Marine Corps commandant told him the day after he received the award.

"He said to me: 'That medal does not belong to you; it belongs to all those Marines who did not get come to home,'" Williams said. "So that made me a role model, whether I wanted to be or not. I didn't have a choice."

PAKTIA, AFGHANISTAN MAY 26, 2008

Courtesy of the U.S. Army

The White House announced on May 31 that Sgt. 1st Class Leroy Petry, who grabbed a live enemy grenade to throw it away from teammates, will become the second living Medal of Honor recipient from the current wars. Petry previously was awarded two Bronze Stars and three Army Commendation Medals.

Ranger sacrificed his arm to save fellow soldiers

Staff Sgt. Leroy Petry was already a decorated war hero before his final deployment to Afghanistan. He had spent 28 months on battlefields in that country and in Iraq, earning two Bronze Stars and three Army Commendation Medals.

But that final deployment brought even greater peril, and his courageous response — which fellow soldiers said saved them from certain death — ultimately earned him the nation's highest military honor.

Petry, 31, will receive the Medal of Honor at a White House ceremony in July, becoming only the second living recipient of the medal from the current wars. The Army Ranger, who now works as a wounded warrior liaison helping other injured soldiers, is the fifth man to receive the Medal of Honor for actions in Afghanistan.

Petry, now a sergeant first class, shied away from the spotlight immediately following the announcement, declining interviews but releasing a statement calling the honor "humbling."

Staff Sgt. Leroy Petry
Medal of Honor

A native of Santa Fe, N.M., Petry joined the Army in 1999, shortly after graduating high school.

In little more than a decade, his Army career took him to Iraq twice and to Afghanistan six times. By his last tour, Petry was an Army Ranger, serving with the 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment.

On Memorial Day in 2008, Petry's company was assigned a dangerous and rare daylight raid of an insurgent compound in Paktia, a volatile border province in southern Afghanistan.

According to Army battlefield reports, soldiers rushed the compound, cleared one section and regrouped to plan the fight ahead. Petry and Pfc. Lucas Robinson moved to clear a courtyard that had been skipped in the initial assault.

When they entered, enemy fighters opened fire. Petry was hit by a round that went through both legs. He and Robinson dove behind a chicken coop for cover.

The soldiers called for help and returned fire. Team leader Sgt. Daniel Higgins crawled to their position and began treating Petry's wounds.

Two other Rangers entered the courtyard to counter the threat, but before they could reach the coop, the three soldiers taking cover there were knocked to the ground by an enemy grenade blast. Shrapnel pelted Robinson and Higgins. Petry gathered himself just in time to see a second grenade land a few feet from them.

Without hesitation, he grabbed the grenade to toss it away. As he did so, the grenade exploded in his hand, severing the lower part of his right arm.

Later, in a statement to service officials, Higgins said that without Petry's quick action, none of the men would have survived.

Shaking off the pain, Petry tied a tourniquet to his arm and kept barking out information to his fellow soldiers. One of them, Spc. Christopher Gathercole, was fatally wounded in the ensuing gunfight. But the other soldiers eventually killed the enemy fighters.

In recommending Petry for the Medal of Honor, members of the company said Petry's sacrifice helped turn the tide of the battle and saved at least four soldiers' lives.

Today, Petry serves as a liaison officer for the U.S. Special Operations Command Care Coalition at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington state, working with wounded and sick servicemembers and their families.

Several of those wounded warriors are expected to attend his Medal of Honor ceremony at the White House on July 12, along with soldiers who were with him in Afghanistan, his wife and their four children.

By Leo Shane III/Stars and Stripes | shanel@stripes.osd.mil | Twitter: @LeoShane

WASHINGTON

New goals for Giunta

Life after Medal of Honor becomes next challenge for Afghanistan war hero

DAVID J. PHILLIP/AP

Sal Giunta does not enjoy wearing his Medal of Honor.

Since he received the award at a White House ceremony last fall, the 26-year-old Afghanistan War hero has worn the bulky medal only at official Army gatherings, charity events and media appearances.

"It's difficult every time I put it on," he told Stars and Stripes.

"The second I throw the medal on, it's kind of like a spotlight. It definitely comes with a heavy weight and responsibility. It's always easier not to have it on."

On Nov. 16, 2010, Giunta became the first living Medal of Honor recipient from the current wars, honored for sprinting across a battlefield in 2008 to save a wounded soldier who was being dragged away by enemy fighters.

The ensuing months have been a blur for Giunta, shuffling from one appearance to the next. He appeared on "The Late Show with David Letterman." He was cheered at the Super Bowl two months later. He's been the guest of honor at dozens of other veterans and charity dinners.

"It's not about me. It's about all these other people, but nobody is putting a camera on them or giving them a microphone. It's never my story, it's our story. I've never done anything alone, but I tend to be the only one standing there."

Salvatore Giunta
First living Medal of Honor recipient from the current wars

He says he's flown enough miles to circle the globe six times.

As much as possible, he tries to steer the attention to the more than 2 million American men and women serving in the military around the world.

"It's not about me," he insisted. "It's about all these other people, but nobody is putting a camera on them or giving them a microphone. It's never my story, it's our story. I've never done anything alone, but I tend to be the only one standing there. ...

"It's all very positive, there's so many positive events. But it also gets tiring."

SEE GOALS ON PAGE 9

JARED ZELL/Courtesy of the U.S. Army

Staff Sgt. Joe Jones takes Staff Sgt. Salvatore Giunta for a 14,000-foot tandem skydive over Stinson Airfield in San Antonio on Jan. 6. Giunta has left the military and plans to attend Colorado State this fall. He says he is looking forward to more time "just to be Sal."

By Leo Shane III/Stars and Stripes | shanel@stripes.osd.mil | Twitter: @LeoShane

WASHINGTON

Air Force Medal of Honor | Army Medal of Honor | Navy Medal of Honor

Number of Medals of Honor on the rise

When Sgt. 1st Class Leroy Petry receives the Medal of Honor in July, he'll be the fourth hero from the war in Afghanistan to receive that recognition from President Barack Obama.

That's a dramatic difference the previous administration, which awarded only a single Medal of Honor for actions in Afghanistan.

White House and Defense Department officials for years have come under criticism for the sparse number of Medals of Honor in recent years. But three new recipients have been chosen for the nation's highest military honor in the last 10 months, and defense officials recently hinted that more could be on the way.

In testimony before Congress this spring, Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel Clifford Stanley said that the department is "diligently processing additional Medal of Honor nominations for the president's consideration, including nominations for other living servicemembers."

Lawmakers for years have complained that military officials have been stingy in recommending servicemembers for the award, adopting unofficial and overly restrictive criteria for recognizing war heroes.

But Pentagon officials insist that no new regulations or priorities have been established, and the small number of awards for the two wars simply reflects the indirect nature of the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Nearly 250 men received the medal for actions in Vietnam. Petry will be the ninth man to receive the award for the current wars, even after more than 2 million troops have been deployed during nearly a decade of continuous conflict.

When Bush left office, he labeled the Defense Department's inability to find a living recipient for the medal one of his greatest regrets.

The timing of the awards for the two living recipients — Staff Sgt. Salvatore Giunta was the first living honoree last fall — illustrates the long processing period that precedes the honor. Both Giunta and Petry were recognized for actions that took place more than three years ago.

The recent increase in awards for service in Afghanistan also reflects the strategic focus of the military shifting from Iraq to Afghanistan in recent years.

During his time in office, Bush recognized four heroes from Iraq with Medals of Honor. Obama, who publicly pledged to end U.S. military involvement in Iraq shortly after taking office, has not awarded any Medals of Honor for that war.

Along with the four Afghanistan heroes, Obama in just three years has awarded three Medals of Honor to servicemembers from earlier wars. Bush awarded nine total during his presidency, including one posthumous award dating to the Civil War.

Medal of Honor facts and figures

- In military history, 19 men have received the Medal of Honor twice.
- Only one woman has been awarded the Medal of Honor: Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, a Civil War civilian surgeon.
- Only one member of the Coast Guard has been awarded the Medal of Honor: Douglas Munro, for actions at Guadalcanal in 1942.
- Theodore Roosevelt, who commanded the Rough Riders during the Spanish-American War, is the only president to be awarded the medal.
- Army Sgt. William Carney was the first African-American to receive the medal, for actions during the Civil War. Since then, 87 African-Americans have received the award.
- Both Gen. Douglas MacArthur and his father, Arthur, received the Medal of Honor.
- During the Civil War, 1,522 Medals of Honor were awarded. At the time, it was the only military award available.

— Jeff Schogol, Stars and Stripes

By Leo Shane III/Stars and Stripes | shanel@stripes.osd.mil | Twitter: @LeoShane

Goals: 'I'm just the same as everyone else'

FROM PAGE 8

Last month, Giunta quietly stepped away from the military to move to Colorado. He acknowledges that he's looking forward to the partial anonymity civilian life can bring.

"I was planning on getting out of the military before (learning he'd receive the medal)," he said.

"Part of staying in the military now already takes me out of my comfort zone, my peer group. I'm no longer with other staff sergeants. I sit at tables with generals.

"The Army would probably let me do most anything I'd want to do. But this was a one-time event. I can earn my keep day by day. Let me prove myself every single day. Don't base my whole life off of one event one time in some foreign country."

He plans to attend Colorado State this fall, and is considering majoring in natural resources management. He and his wife, Jenny, are expecting their first child early next year, thrilling news that has him more nervous than his Army days.

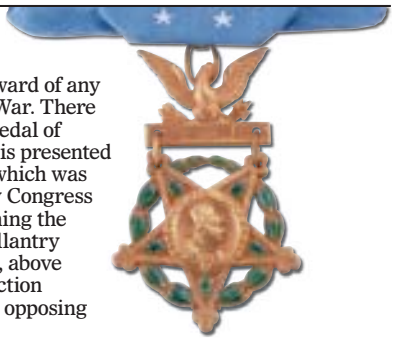
Giunta said he doubts he'll talk about the medal much with his college classmates.

"There's a time to represent the men and women in uniform, and there's a time that hopefully is just to be Sal," he said. "In Colorado, at home and at school, I'm just the same as everyone else."

The military awards

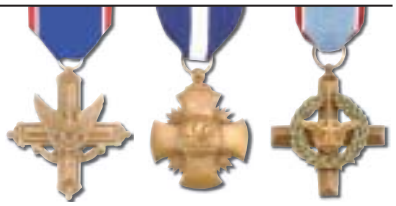
Gen. George Washington established the first U.S. military award, called the Badge of Military Merit, in his General Orders of Aug. 7, 1782. The badge was to be awarded in "not only instances of unusual gallantry but also of extraordinary fidelity and essential service," the orders said. "The road to 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 also is presented 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, 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 Distinguished Service Cross 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 Calvin Coolidge in 1926 (retroactive to 1918) to honor aviation's pioneers. Coolidge gave the first DFC to Charles Lindbergh on June 11, 1927. For the DFC to be awarded for heroism, the act "must involve voluntary action in the face of danger and be well above the actions performed by others engaged in similar flight operations."

Bronze Star with "V"

The Bronze Star was established in February 1944 (retroactive to Dec. 6, 1941). The original purpose 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. The Air Medal is awarded only for circumstances involving participation in aerial flight.

Army Commendation Medal Air Force Commendation Medal Navy/Marine Corps Commendation Medal All 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 criteria are essentially the same for the Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal, which also is presented for such service after Dec. 6, 1941, and the Air Force Commendation Medal, which is awarded for distinctive merit after March 24, 1958.

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 the "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.

ISA KHEL, AFGHANISTAN

APRIL 2, 2010

Chief Warrant Officer 3 Jason LaCrosse was awarded the Silver Star for his role in extracting wounded German soldiers from an intense firefight in Afghanistan in April 2010. Thirteen other soldiers received the Distinguished Flying Cross. All 14 crewmembers were awarded the German Gold Cross for Valor, Germany's second-highest military award. They became the first soldiers outside the German military to receive the award.

Courtesy of the U.S. Army

'Like flying into a hornet's nest'

A routine mission to deal with a roadside bomb turned into the worst day since World War II for German troops. Were it not for their American counterparts, it would have been much worse. Enemy fire erupted from all directions as the Germans made their way through Isa Khel, a town in Paktia province, on April 2, 2010. Suddenly, the soldiers were trapped, tending desperately to wounded comrades, and looking for a way out.

"You could barely see them," one German soldier later recalled. "You should not think these are simply farmers. They know how to fight."

Master Sgt. Patrick Bonneik, a German joint terminal attack controller, made the first call requesting a medical evacuation for two severely injured soldiers. Minutes later, U.S. helicopters from a base in nearby Kunduz lifted off to retrieve the wounded.

The injured needed help and fast. With the fight still raging, Bonneik worried that landing zones would be too hot for the U.S. medevac crews. He feared the wounded would not make it out alive.

The first time the helicopters came in for a landing, they came under intense enemy fire.

To Chief Warrant Officer 3 Jason LaCrosse, it "was like flying into a hornet's nest, with 200 Taliban shooting at us."

"They were shooting at us from compounds, they were shooting at us from an open field, they were shooting at us from a tree line," he said. "Heavy fire came from all directions. I had two [rocket-propelled grenades] crisscross underneath my tail as we were coming in to land, and the aircraft was getting hit so much by small rounds ricocheting that you could see sparks flying off of our tail."

The helicopter drew the Taliban's fire, allowing the unhurt German troops to flee, according to battle reports. But the fire was so heavy that the Americans couldn't land. LaCrosse ordered his crew to "go around," signaling they would attempt to land again.

The helicopters had been unable to establish communication with the Germans on the ground, so it was disheartening for the soldiers to see LaCrosse abort the landing attempt.

"I thought [the pilot] was going to fly away," said Bonneik. He thought wrong.

Chief Warrant Officer 3 Jason LaCrosse

Silver Star

Capt. Robert McDonough
Chief Warrant Officer 3 Steven Husted
Chief Warrant Officer 3 Nelson Visaya
Chief Warrant Officer 2 Jason Brown
Chief Warrant Officer 2 Sean Johnson
Chief Warrant Officer 2 Eric Wells
Staff Sgt. Travis Brown
Sgt. William Ebel
Sgt. Antonio Gattis
Sgt. Steven Schumaker
Spc. Matthew Baker
Spc. Todd Marchese
Spc. Gregory Martinez

Distinguished Flying Cross

As the helicopters prepared for another landing attempt, pilots noticed white smoke from a different landing zone. They put down there and tried again to establish radio communications with the ground forces.

The German soldier on the ground could not establish a frequency both the helicopter and the ground forces could use, but he said that the patients were in the process of being moved to the new landing zone.

LaCrosse and his crew took off again, trying to avoid being a sitting target while the Germans readied the patients. After several minutes, LaCrosse brought the helicopter down again and medic Staff Sgt. Travis Brown ran out to establish communications with the Germans. He could not, and soon the bird was in the air again.

Finally, through relayed communications, the crew made contact with Bonneik, who said the patients were almost ready for pickup and they were moving them to the alternate landing zone.

LaCrosse, a pilot for 14 years, knew they'd already lost too much time. Waiting for the patients to reach the alternate landing zone was too risky.

"Allied troops on the ground are injured, and if we don't get them to a hospital they are going to die," LaCrosse said of his reason for landing, "and I am not going to allow that to happen."

LaCrosse returned to the original landing zone, where they again faced heavy fire. But this time he was able to direct ground forces to provide cover fire, offering just enough distraction that the Americans could land twice, picking up two wounded soldiers and returning them to Kunduz.

By the time the second soldier was lifted out, Americans got word that a German vehicle had struck a roadside bomb. Four more wounded.

SEE LACROSSE ON PAGE 24

By Dan Blottenberger and Marcus Klockner/Stars and Stripes | blottenbergerd@estripes.osd.mil; klocknerm@estripes.osd.mil

WASHINGTON

Standing in the shadows

The quiet heroism of America's secret warriors

Were they heroes? Or were they fulfilling their job descriptions?

We know the bare outline of the May raid: Some of the United States' best sailors and soldiers entered Pakistan undetected, slipping through the darkness in secret stealth helicopters across 100 miles of potentially hostile territory. They continued the mission despite losing a helicopter and dispatched the target — elusive al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden. Then they scooped up a wealth of intelligence materials and disappeared.

Although there's plenty the public may never know about the operation, the details that have leaked out have been breathtaking, providing a rare glimpse into the ultra-secretive world of the U.S. military's most elite troops.

Often working in tandem with intelligence operatives, they are called up at a moment's notice, sometimes disappearing for months into the globe's darkest locales to do exacting, perilous work that never will rivet the public's attention like the bin Laden kill.

Danger and secrecy — it's what the so-called "quiet professionals" of the special operations community know they're signing up for when they choose to enter the exclusive fraternity that has borne an outsized load of the United States' decade-long war against terrorists.

So again, were they just doing their jobs, or did the Navy SEALs and Army special operations aviators who carried out the bin Laden mission go above and beyond that day?

Yes on both counts, say men who have done similar work.

"It's a SEAL's job to kick ass," said Richard Marcinko, a former SEAL officer who founded the storied SEAL Team 6, known officially as Navy Special Warfare Development Group, or DEVGRU, which stormed bin Laden's hideout.

Were they just doing their jobs, or did the Navy SEALs and Army special operations aviators who carried out the bin Laden mission go above and beyond that day? Yes on both counts.

Still, Marcinko said, the question of how to define heroism in the context of special operations is fair to ask. He often wondered about it when he recommended his own troops for medals.

"So when they do kick ass, are they doing their job like they're paid to do — and remember they get paid extra for this work — or are they going above and beyond?" he said.

Because of that uncertainty, Marcinko often made conservative medal recommendations for his troops. But medal review boards sometimes saw the operations in a different light, bumping up about 10 percent of his recommendations to a higher award — fine by him, he said.

Based on what he's heard about the bin Laden operation, the special operators involved deserve medals for heroism, but nothing over the top, Marcinko said. Contrary to early reports, they were not heavily engaged within the bin Laden compound, nor did they have to fight their way out of Pakistan.

"Just for being there and not getting hurt, by all means, a Bronze Star," he said. "The guys who went through the door, do they get a Silver Star? Maybe so."

Other former special operators were less conservative.

Former SEAL Stew Smith said the difficulty of the mission, combined with the strategic and symbolic value of killing the world's leading terrorist, should qualify many of the team members for Navy Crosses, the highest medal the Navy can award, second only to the Medal of Honor.

But looked at another way, the raid wasn't fundamentally different operation from many others done daily by special operations units from the various services in Afghanistan and Iraq, Smith said. The main difference was the objective, and the resulting level of fanfare.

SEE SHADOWS ON PAGE 13

Courtesy of sealswcc.com

By Chris Carroll/Stars and Stripes | carrollc@stripes.osd.mil | Twitter: @ChrisCarroll_

KORENGAL VALLEY, AFGHANISTAN JUNE 19, 2009

'They kept coming'

It was a rainy afternoon in the Korengal Valley, the kind of weather that for Petty Officer 2nd Class Franco Ahumada usually meant the day would pass without incident.

But outside the wire, in the drizzle, unseen fighters were moving into position in the rugged and remote Afghanistan valley.

Ahumada was in his hooch when machine gun fire punched through the dreary afternoon.

The Afghan fighters, armed with Russian PKM machine guns, launched an offensive June 19, 2009, against Firebase Vegas, a desolate Korengal outpost shared by U.S. and Afghan troops.

In an instant, the corpsman's slow day morphed into hard combat.

Ahumada would make a death-defying dash through the gunfire to retrieve a grenade launcher — an act of bravery that would help win the fight for the coalition force and earn him a Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal with "V." He would receive a second commendation medal for valor while mentoring Afghan soldiers during the same deployment.

"It just takes one wrong step or just one good leading round" to be killed when running through gunfire, he said.

In the summer of 2009, the Korengal Valley was still one of Afghanistan's fiercest battlegrounds. The U.S. pulled forces from the area in mid-2010 after five years of fighting without transformative gains.

Ahumada was an instructor with Embedded Training Team 5-4, which was part of the 201st Corps of the Afghan National Army, and fought beside each platoon of Afghan soldiers he trained at the small firebase during his 11 months in the valley.

Petty Officer 2nd Class Franco Ahumada

Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal with "V"

"If you are in a firefight, you are depending on them and they are depending on you," Ahumada said. "You have to develop that relationship."

The attack on the base on that rainy afternoon became one of the worst battles Ahumada and his platoon of 22 Afghan soldiers would face together.

"As soon as I came out the door, there was a fixed position of anti-coalition forces," Ahumada said.

He sprinted from the door to a position at the wire with both an Afghan National Army commander and an interpreter.

The U.S. Army platoon that occupied the opposite side of the small base opened fire into the valley.

Ahumada's platoon of Afghan soldiers was firing back from their side of the compound and using a Squad Automatic Weapon and a PKM machine gun as part of the effort to repel the attack.

Coalition mortars boomed along the insurgent positions.

"You could sense pauses after the impacts but they kept coming," Ahumada said.

The SAW and PKM jammed, overheated and then ran out of ammo as the firefight wore on.

The coalition fire wasn't getting to the enemy fighters hiding behind rocks.

"I knew I had to get on my target that was 100 to 150 meters out," he said. "I knew the best way to get in there was an M203" grenade launcher."

The next moments could have ended badly.

But the battle depended on Ahumada getting across to the U.S. side of the firebase and bringing back a grenade launcher.

It depended on 165 feet of open ground, Ahumada's luck and the accuracy of enemy machine gun fire.

With bullets kicking up dirt, he made the run.

"I guess they could see me because they just kind of had a bead on me the whole way," he said.

On the other side, a servicemember was waiting with the grenade launcher.

"I said, 'I need your 203 right now,'" Ahumada said. "He gave me his bandolier and I ran back through."

He launched the first two rounds. Confirmation came back over the radio that the enemy positions were hit. Ahumada pumped another eight grenades out over the wire.

The Afghan attackers finally retreated from positions among the rocks under the barrage. Servicemembers on the U.S. side of the joint firebase continued the offensive until the firefight was won.

The ANA fighters under his mentorship had done well under fire, Ahumada said.

The violent encounter dissolved again into calm for the time being.

"It was just another day after that," he said.

By Travis J. Tritten/Stars and Stripes | trittent@pstripes.osd.mil

Shadows: 'Guys at that level can make it look easy'

FROM PAGE 12

"This is what they do for a living — get off helicopters in a hurry, run into unlit buildings and clear them, and get out," he said. "So in that way, the bin Laden operation was Mission 101 for most of these guys. You just happened to have a high-value target on the other end.

"Don't get me wrong, it's not at all easy. But guys at that level can make it look easy."

The high-risk, high-reward nature of their missions means special operators have abundant opportunities to earn medals. When they do, however, they often can't go into details about why a particular decoration happens to be hanging on their chest.

"We certainly were awarded medals for bravery and acts of heroism," said Cliff Newman, a former Army Green Beret who fought as part of the secretive MACV-SOG unconventional warfare operations in Vietnam. "The thing is, the medal citation will say it's for something done 'in the field of operations' rather than where it happened. And if what you were doing is classified, it doesn't talk about that either."

Special operations troops aren't bothered by the fact they can't sit at the bar bragging about the hair-raising deeds that won them their medals.

"No way," Smith said. "Even regular soldiers and sailors often don't even want to talk about their medals. My granddad, for example, didn't want to tell me why he had a Bronze Star and Purple Heart."

Special operations troops aren't bothered by the fact they can't sit at the bar bragging about the hair-raising deeds that won them their medals.

Elite fighters are more interested in respect from their peers than public adulation, Smith said.

"Even long after they retire, it's not normally something they want to relive with people who aren't one of them, with people who didn't go through it and might not understand," he said.

Maturity is a key characteristic of elite troops, Newman said. The SEALs on the team that got bin Laden are likely confident but low-key in their everyday lives, motivated by patriotism and professionalism — "guys who'd fit right in at the neighbor's barbecue," he said.

"I would guess the average age of the guys on that team is probably in their 30s, so these aren't kids right out of high school and basic training," he said. "By the time you've gone through what they've gone through to get to that point, you don't do those things for medals. You do them because it's your job, and you simply want to do a good job."

So beyond practicalities such as promotion points, medals don't matter much?

That's what special operations guys often claim, anyway, said Kyle Lamb, who joined the Army's elite counterterrorist Delta Force in 1991 and retired in 2007 after actions ranging from the Battle of Mogadishu to more recent missions in the war on terror. He can't go into detail on many of them, he says.

The point to keep in mind is that medals aren't meant just to gratify the servicemember they're awarded to. When the classified details are no longer important, the reminder of a loved one's heroism will be.

"Someday your kids and grandkids are going to be digging through an old box," Lamb said. "For them, the medals are going to matter a lot."

PECH RIVER VALLEY, AFGHANISTAN SEPT. 13, 2010

'That's courage right there'

Staff Sgt. McCarthy Phillip made his peace with death.

Too many times that day, maneuvering through all-too-open terrain, he found himself exposed and vulnerable, bullets whizzing past close enough to hear, kicking up the grainy Afghan soil around his feet.

"In my mind, I'm thinking, 'After all the firefights I've been in, this is the one that's gonna get me. This is the one you're not going to make it out of,'" he said. "It was like watching a movie."

One hundred meters away, his platoon leader, 1st Lt. Alex Pruden, crouched behind a wall — a safer position but not by much amid the two-sided ambush suddenly upon them. As he watched Phillip race downhill toward him, navigating rocky terrain with a wounded comrade slung over his back, Pruden hoped desperately for a Hollywood ending.

"Right at that moment, when I saw him running back and I saw bullets landing around his feet and we're in the thick of a fight, I remember thinking, 'Wow, that's courage right there,'" Pruden said. "And it wasn't something that he did because he was looking for a Bronze Star with 'V' or because he wanted to show how much of a man he was. There was a guy who was injured, we were under fire, lives were at risk and he put his own life at even greater risk in order to help his fellow squad leader."

Courtesy of the U.S. Army

Staff Sgt. McCarthy Phillip, a squad leader with Company C, 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division, hoisted an injured squad leader onto his back and carried him through a firefight to safety. Phillip, who grew up in a poor, crime-riddled area outside Kingston, Jamaica, is thinking about an Army career. "Take away getting shot at and blown up and people actually trying to hunt to kill you, it's not a bad gig."

Staff Sgt. McCarthy Phillip
Bronze Star with "V"

'Everything ... went wrong'

On Sept. 13, 2010, the sun was shining on Afghanistan's Pech River Valley and the mission, to engage residents of Topa village, was moving along as planned for the Fort Campbell, Ky.-based soldiers.

"It was a perfect day and then everything that could go wrong, went wrong," Phillip said.

Finding things in order inside the village, Pruden made the call to investigate a lone house more than 200 meters up a draw. He assigned one group of soldiers to a nearby hill as an overwatch element, while the rest of the platoon — including Pruden, Phillip's squad and Staff Sgt. Pedro Ramos' squad — ventured toward the draw to investigate the house and the area.

Soon after they arrived, the rain came down, followed immediately by the bullets.

A group of Taliban fighters hid on a nearby mountainside. Their rounds were dangerously accurate, and the gunfire echoed so strangely off the rocks that it was impossible to pinpoint the attackers' location.

Ramos was with his squad beyond the house when the fight started. He began directing his men to cover but as he rushed from one position to the next, a bullet tore through his right foot, exploding his heel.

From inside the house, Phillip watched Ramos tumble downhill before he came to a stop and dragged himself behind a rock. Ramos shouldered his weapon and began firing toward the mountainside, but he was isolated and immobile.

Phillip grabbed a medic, Spc. Matthew Frank, and the two raced across 100 open meters and collapsed behind the rock with their wounded comrade.

In the process, they'd drawn the full attention — and fire — of the attackers, an estimated 25 fighters split into two groups.

"Think about three big guys with gear trying to hide behind a boulder the size of a refrigerator door," Phillip said.

The medic administered initial aid, including three shots of morphine, to Ramos, who by then was in immense pain. With the sudden turn in the weather, aircraft in the area and available for support were forced to return to base. Phillip informed the others that they had to move.

Ramos, unable to walk let alone run, resisted.

"Dude, they're shooting at us," Phillip said. "They're going to kill us."

"I can't move, man. What the hell do you want me to do?" Ramos said.

"Dude, we've got to move from here," Phillip insisted.

With that, he handed off his weapon to Frank, hoisted Ramos onto his back and ran.

Soldiers back at the house and behind a short wall nearby directed suppressive fire at the area where they believed the fighters were hiding.

At the end of their frantic dash, Phillip dumped Ramos beside Pruden at the base of the wall and took cover. But the bullets hadn't stopped, and as Pruden noticed another impact close to Ramos, he grabbed his leg to pull him farther behind cover.

They were still more than 200 meters from safety.

'It's a miracle'

Throughout the fight, the soldiers never laid eyes on an enemy fighter. There were no shadows, no muzzle flashes. Pruden studied the terrain and put the pieces together.

The sharp, steep ridges were peppered with boulders and scrubby bushes. The boulders were the key.

"A perfect, naturally made fighting position," he said. "Natural pillboxes. Stick a barrel out and they can hit you."

Pruden ordered fire directed toward those boulders, including mortar after mortar — 35 in all — so the soldiers could make their way across the treacherous expanse between the house and the village.

As the 17 men — 14 U.S. soldiers, two Afghan soldiers and an interpreter — bounded back, stopping frequently behind whatever small piece of cover they could find, the enemy fighters maneuvered to keep up.

With Ramos shot, Phillip was the ranking noncommissioned officer in the unit. He alternately carried his wounded mate and directed his soldiers' movement, using the platoon's radio network. Pruden took his turns carrying Ramos and radioed back to arrange support and reinforcements at the village.

The enemy fire remained focused and intense. It took about 15 minutes, moving in breathless stop-and-go bursts, to reach the village.

"I was amazed," Pruden said. "Truthfully, it's a miracle no one else got shot."

Back in the village, the soldiers piled into a house and Phillip coordinated a defensive perimeter until they could get Ramos loaded into a truck and back to Forward Operating Base Blessing for treatment. He was soon shipped to the U.S. military hospital in Landstuhl, Germany, and later sent back to the States. He's awaiting his third surgery to reconstruct his right foot. His nine-year infantry career is over, and he's expecting to be reassigned to a new job this fall.

When the rest of the unit made it home in April, Ramos was waiting for them. He hugged Phillip and thanked him over and over.

"I'm still here, I'm still alive because of him," Ramos said. "I've been in combat four times and I've seen a lot. And 'Wow.'"

SEE PHILLIP ON PAGE 15

■ For an audio slideshow of Phillip talking about his experiences, go to **stripes.com/heroes/phillip**

By Derek Turner/Stars and Stripes | turnerd@stripes.osd.mil | Twitter: @DerekTurnerDC

NEAR ASADABAD, AFGHANISTAN SEPT. 24, 2009

‘It was time to get to work’

Cpl. Helen Ruhl dove out of the mangled Humvee so quickly that she didn’t even notice she was on fire. “Honestly, I still don’t remember that,” she said. “They told me that my commander had to actually put me out.

Cpl. Helen Ruhl
Bronze Star with “V”

“I could stand, I looked down and still had both of my hands, so I thought it was time to get to work.”

What the 25-year-old Army medic remembers from the first moments of that September 2009 ambush in eastern Afghanistan was the heat and blinding white flash from the rocket-propelled grenade that detonated in her Humvee driver’s lap.

Within seconds she and her fellow soldiers were dragging him from the wreckage as bullets bounced around them. Army officials say her calm concentration on tending to his wounds while under fire undoubtedly saved the soldier’s life, and earned her a Bronze Star with “V” for heroism.

But Ruhl, a one-time explosive ordnance disposal technician who switched to the medical corps to be closer to the front lines, downplayed the praise, crediting training and teamwork with making sure no troops on the mission lost their lives.

The ambush happened just outside of Asadabad, as members of the 4th Brigade Combat Team returned from their fourth straight day of resupply work. U.S. troops in the region had frequent contact with enemy forces, but Ruhl said they were mostly just a few “pop shots” and minor skirmishes that barely slowed missions.

This time, the soldiers didn’t get any such warning. The first shot of the attack was the grenade that punched through the Humvee door, severely damaging the driver’s legs.

The blast left Ruhl’s ears squealing and her vision blurred, leaving her disoriented in the opening moments of the ensuing firefight. She hadn’t realized how badly injured her driver was until he was bleeding out on the ground next to the smoldering vehicle.

“It sounds cold, but when I got to (the driver) I didn’t see him,” she said. “I saw his legs and that was it. At that point, he was a pair of legs I needed to fix.”

Ruhl put a tourniquet on his right leg while directing another medic from a trailing Humvee to tend to his left one. Because of her hearing loss and the firefight, the two had to use hand signals to communicate.

They managed to temporarily halt the bleeding and pull the driver toward another truck for cover. As they loaded him in, Ruhl had to pick up a rifle and return fire against the attacking gunmen.

While they sped away, the injured soldier asked for morphine to blunt the pain. But Ruhl worried he might stop breathing if she gave him the drug, so instead she kept reassuring him and quizzing him about friends and family.

“Before, I didn’t have time to be angry or upset,” she said. “I had time to do my job, and that was it. But it became personal then, because I was asking those questions.”

When they arrived at a nearly base, Ruhl helped stabilize the soldier and tend to two others with minor injuries. A medevac helicopter arrived soon after, and told Ruhl they were ready to evacuate all four wounded troops, including her.

“I said to the pilot I wasn’t one (of the wounded). I didn’t know I was hurt yet. I had no idea that any of the blood on me was mine.”

In fact, Ruhl was bleeding from her eye and her ears. The blast ruptured a cyst on her brain near her optic nerve, which had caused the vision and hearing problems throughout the response. She also had a host of minor shrapnel wounds and burns.

Her injuries were severe enough that she followed her driver on medical evacuations all the way back to the U.S., monitoring his condition with local surgeons at each stop. In the end he lost his leg, but Army officials said he would have lost his life if not for Ruhl’s immediate response.

Ruhl’s injuries also left her unable to return to combat, but she currently completing undergrad work at University of Colorado to continue her medical career. She said her story is more about the importance of training than individual heroism.

“It’s muscle memory,” she said. “I’m not sure I knew what I was doing. I just knew that what I was doing was working.”

Courtesy of Helen Ruhl

Cpl. Helen Ruhl poses inside a Humvee during her deployment in Afghanistan in 2009. Ruhl was awarded a Bronze Star with “V” for her quick response during a September 2009 ambush that seriously injured the driver of her vehicle. She suffered eye and ear injuries during the attack, but was unaware she had been hurt until she was told by a medevac pilot.

By Leo Shane III/Stars and Stripes | shanel@stripes.osd.mil | Twitter: @LeoShane

Phillip: ‘I grew up on the wrong side of the streets’

FROM PAGE 14

Phillip, though, downplayed the heroics.

“I know for a fact that I could be in any situation in a firefight and some guys would put their life on the line without even thinking about it,” Phillip said later. “That’s our training. We live with these guys. We sweat, we train, we eat, we cry, we get shot at. We get close.”

Before they parted, Ramos thanked him once more.

“He told me he owed me big time,” Phillip said. “I told him he owed me a case of beer.”

‘Not a bad gig’

Phillip speaks matter-of-factly about the ambush. He doesn’t dwell on how close he came to death because, to his mind, all the risks and danger inherent in an infantryman’s life are preferable to the life he left behind.

Phillip grew up outside Kingston, Jamaica, in a poor area with a wealth of crime. He knew no luxuries and no way to find a better life on the island. When his son was born, he was desperate for a way to provide for him those luxuries and that better life.

He moved to America.

After trying out a few jobs, he settled on the U.S. Army. It didn’t take long to learn that Army life suited him just fine. He earned his Ranger tab as a private first class. He spent 15 months in Iraq in 2008 and 2009, and came to Afghanistan in 2010.

“The Army was easy for me because of my life growing up,” he said. “I grew up on the wrong side of the streets. What people thought is hard was easy for me. When people say, ‘Hey, we got a road march,’ OK, I’ve been walking miles already to do stuff because I didn’t have a car, we didn’t have buses back in the islands. Walking 12 miles? I was doing that as a kid. So 12 miles, that’s no problem.”

In December, he received his Bronze Star with “V” from Defense Secretary Robert Gates during a ceremony in Afghanistan.

“Looking back at everything now,” Phillip said, “when I’m getting pinned — by, I call him “The Man,” but the secretary — it was weird because I was like ‘Wow, you know, eight years ago, I was back home and now I’m getting pinned by the secretary of defense. Wow, this is big. This is real big.’”

He made sergeant a year and a half after joining the Army, staff sergeant two years later. He led soldiers on the battlefield in Afghanistan. Now, he’s thinking about making a career out of it.

Said Phillip: “Take away getting shot at and blown up and people actually trying to hunt to kill you, it’s not a bad gig.”

ARGHANDAB, AFGHANISTAN SEPT. 30, 2010

'We had done everything right'

Amid a firefight in heavily mined farmland of the Arghandab River Valley, Cpl. David Bixler turned to see an Afghan soldier about to step on uncleared ground.

Bixler leaped up, grabbed the soldier by the collar of his body armor and yanked him backward.

And then, Bixler said, "I went kaboom."

For the next three months, he didn't get out of his hospital bed.

"I lost count of how many surgeries I had," he said. "For a while there, I was spending 18 hours a day in surgery. ... One after another after another. First they fixed my insides, and then they worked on my legs."

He remembers his response when he heard from buddies downrange that the Afghan soldier had suffered only minor injuries: "Mission accomplished."

Saving the soldier earned Bixler the Silver Star.

JOE GROMELSKI/Stars and Stripes

Cpl. David Bixler earned the Silver Star for saving the life of an Afghan soldier who was about to step on an IED. Bixler stepped on the bomb and lost both his legs in the explosion. He's learning to walk with prosthetics at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Behind Bixler is his wife, Stephanie.

'There were bombs everywhere'

The 1st Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment, 101st Airborne Division arrived in eastern Arghandab during the summer of 2010 as part of the surge in the pivotal southern province of Kandahar. The battalion replaced a company that had largely been hemmed in by the insurgents, and Bixler's unit started aggressively challenging the Taliban in their entrenched position.

The pace was "madness," Bixler said.

By late September, more than a dozen soldiers in the unit had been killed or wounded. Bixler's platoon leader had been killed by an improvised explosive device.

"There were bombs everywhere," Bixler said. "We had done everything right. We had scanned all the places we were stepping. We had done all the stuff you're supposed to do to make sure we don't blow up and people were still dying."

On Sept. 30, 2010, Bixler's platoon left one of the unit's small combat outposts, heading across muddy grape furrows and pomegranate orchards to speak with a few local elders. The area was so densely mined with pressure-plate bombs that an explosive ordnance disposal crew had to clear a narrow path for the soldiers.

Bixler was the last soldier, picking up the panels that marked the safe pathway as they went.

The day before, he had been assigned a team of three Afghan National Army soldiers to lead during the patrol. He took an interpreter to meet them.

The machine gunner and team leader for the Afghans was a 20-year-old named Fazel. He told Bixler he intended to get married soon.

The five of them planned the patrol.

"I went and sought them out to teach them as much as I could. I tried to make sure that they were as ready as much as possible for me to lead them," Bixler said. "It really didn't help."

'We knew it was there'

As Bixler's platoon neared the village, they had to wade a sewage-strewn canal and climb a tall dirt berm on the other side.

"We weren't talking too much at that point, trying to stay quiet," Bixler said.

The tree line in front of them opened up with machine gun fire.

Most of the platoon was pinned down in a ditch beside the berm they had just climbed. Because of the heavily mined terrain, only a few soldiers could get into decent fighting positions.

The platoon leader called for them to turn back on the cleared path and re-engage on safer ground. Bixler was now in the lead, prepared to remark the path.

Fazel, a little shaky once the shooting started, "misinterpreted everything and took off" ahead of the platoon, Bixler said.

Another soldier yelled and Bixler turned his head to see Fazel bounding up the dirt berm back toward the canal — and off the cleared path.

He yelled "Stop" in Dari.

And then in Pashtu.

And again in English.

Fazel looked at Bixler but kept going.

Bixler jumped up from the ditch and chased him to "keep him off that soft dirt, where obviously something was there. I didn't know where, he didn't know where but we knew it was there. He was not thinking it through, and he stepped right on top of that stuff."

Cpl. David Bixler
Silver Star

Bixler screamed at him, told him not to move.

Catching up, he grabbed Fazel's body armor and pulled him back off the soft dirt, but the force of the movement knocked Bixler off balance.

"When I threw him back, it caused me to go forward and a little bit to the side," he said. "At that point: Boom."

Bixler had stepped on an IED rigged with two 82mm mortars.

'This sucks'

The explosion threw Bixler into the air. He landed hard on his face but managed to roll over.

A quick survey revealed his left arm was torn open to the bone and he had an abdominal wound that wasn't bleeding. He thought: "OK, I'm still alive."

He scanned farther down and saw that his legs were mostly gone. The blast amputated his right leg below the thigh. His lower left leg dangled from the knee.

Bixler flung his shredded left arm across his body and reached into a pocket on his right shoulder for his tourniquet.

"I got about halfway," he said. "Before I could cinch it down, I started fading out."

He came to briefly with medics hovering over him, but he passed out again as they heaved him onto the stretcher.

The soldiers dragged him back over the canal, and Bixler woke up again in the water — "not a pleasant experience," he said.

The soldiers started peppering Bixler with questions.

Did he know who he was?

"I'm David Bixler," he said. "This sucks. I don't have any legs."

He faded again.

SEE BIXLER ON PAGE 17

By Megan McCloskey/Stars and Stripes | mccloskeym@stripes.osd.mil | Twitter: @MegMcCloskey

GHOSLECK VALLEY, AFGHANISTAN MAY 24, 2009

'You have to listen'

The enemy attack and ensuing seven-hour battle weren't nearly as surprising for Air Force Staff Sgt. Kenneth Walker III as the medal he earned for his actions that day.

Walker — a member of the Washington State Air National Guard — was awarded the Bronze Star with "V" for repeatedly putting himself in harm's way during a fierce firefight in Afghanistan's Ghosleck Valley on May 24, 2009.

Courtesy of Kenneth Walker III

Staff Sgt. Kenneth Walker III, seen during his 2009 deployment to Afghanistan, earned the Bronze Star with "V" for repeatedly putting himself in harm's way during a firefight in the Ghosleck Valley.

But he had no idea that he had even been nominated for the medal until Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz pinned it on his chest during a September 2010 ceremony in Washington, D.C. Walker was there to receive another award: He had been named one of the Air Force's 12 Outstanding Airmen of the Year.

"I had no clue," Walker said about the medal, earned during his fifth deployment to Afghanistan. "I was nervous ... definitely proud because of the people I work with."

Staff Sgt. Kenneth Walker III
Bronze Star with "V"

Walker is a tactical air control party member, the liaison between troops on the ground and the vital air support they rely on from above. In early 2009, he deployed to Afghanistan and was attached to Company C, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment (Task Force Spader).

On May 24, he was on a patrol to an Afghan village, the site of previous heavy enemy contact. Walker said he had butterflies in his stomach, knowing that there would likely be another fight that day.

They made it into the village, but started hearing Taliban radio chatter. Village elders said they couldn't guarantee there wouldn't be an attack and urged the military to leave. The only way out of the village, Walker said, was a roughly 40-yard bridge over a river. Most of the U.S. forces made it over the bridge with their Afghan counterparts, but the enemy opened fire as the last men — including Walker — tried to cross.

Walker was part of an eight-man group trapped in the village, and under fire.

"It was heavy machine gun fire [and] small arms," Walker said.

The Taliban "had good eyes" on the Americans.

Walker and fellow TACP Staff Sgt. John Robertson began communicating over their radios to pilots in Army attack helicopters and Air Force A-10 aircraft. Robertson called in aircraft to show the enemy "we've got aircraft on station," Walker said. But it didn't stall the attack.

Walker and Robertson were separated from their ground commander during the initial scramble for cover, but needed to link back up. Walker said the commander decided to come to them, and did so at a full sprint.

Walker stepped out into the open to help provide cover, and two enemy fighters opened fire on him. The bullets struck the wall next to him, spraying shrapnel into his hand, arm, neck and face.

"It knocked me on my back," he said, describing a mixture of shock and pain.

Robertson reached out and pulled him behind the wall.

Walker's right hand was too numb to use, so he switched his weapon to his left hand, stuck his head back out and shot and killed both of the Taliban who had fired on him.

Walker continued to feed radio messages to Robertson, who coordinated the airstrikes.

The command group was finally able to sprint across the bridge to join up with their patrol. Walker spotted more enemy while running, and began firing. He found an infantryman firing an M-240 machine gun, and asked to use it to help mark the enemy's location for the pilots above. A helicopter pilot was able to follow the line of tracer rounds, and made two strafing runs. A 500-pound bomb dropped from an A-10 finally silenced the fire.

Walker said following the flow of the battle, interpreting calls from his fellow troops and then coordinating airstrikes is difficult.

"There's so much going on at once," he said. "You have to listen to what they're saying" and paint the environment in your mind.

"It's not that easy, but we do have the tools and skills to ... point the aircraft in the right direction."

He said he didn't think his injuries were serious enough to seek medical attention, so he "put some peroxide on it, took a nap, and we went out again the next day."

After returning from deployment, however, he began experiencing problems with his hand and eventually had to have surgery.

In January, Walker was preparing for his sixth deployment to Afghanistan. He said each one gets tougher as his four children get older.

Publicity of his award also clued his family in to how dangerous his job can be.

"This one's tough," he said of the upcoming deployment. "They're a little older now and they ask a lot of sincere questions."

By T.D. Flack/Stars and Stripes | flackt@pstripes.osd.mil

Bixler: 'I'm lucky to be alive. So is the ANA guy.'

FROM PAGE 16

The pain didn't come until they had made it to the landing zone for the medevac.

"I started screaming," Bixler said. "I went into shock. Both my arms went numb, my face went numb and tingly. The next thing I know I'm in the helicopter."

Before the helicopter took off, his platoon sergeant handed him a boot.

"You're missing something," Bixler recalled Sgt. 1st Class Kyle Lyon telling him.

He gripped his amputated right foot against his chest.

"I hate you," he told Lyon.

'How long before I can stand up?'

Doctors essentially took Bixler apart and put him back together.

"My spine had to be reconnected and fixed. My whole rear end had to be reassembled," he said during an April interview at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington.

The shrapnel in his left arm separated flesh but didn't touch any major nerves or slice through tendons.

"There's some muscle loss, but it still works," Bixler said, twisting his left elbow around to check out the scar.

Getting vertical again was more frustrating. He begged doctors for answers.

"How long do you think this is going to take before I can walk again?" he asked. "How long before I can stand up on some legs? I need to be upright talking to humans."

■ To see video of Bixler at Walter Reed, go to **stripes.com/heroes/bixler**

Five months after getting blown up, he put on his first pair of prosthetics, short training legs that leave him six inches below his natural height. They don't have knee joints — he has to learn balance first — but after two months with them he could stand and walk with the aid of physical therapy equipment.

He describes the first time he stood up as "a combination of euphoria and the feeling you get when you drink just enough alcohol to where you don't care about anything anymore."

Bixler despises his wheelchair.

"Sitting in the chair, I gotta look up to everybody," he said. "I feel like a kid again. It's not right. And it's not the position a soldier should be in. You should be able to stand up, shake your guy's hand and talk face to face."

He's looking forward to wearing his uniform again, "to walk around and be criticized because I didn't blouse my boots properly," he joked, adding with a laugh that he'll relish bending over and pulling up his pants legs to reveal his metal legs.

Bixler said he doesn't have any regrets about what he did that day. He's proud that no one was killed. The Afghan soldier, Fazel, had minor shrapnel injuries and two American soldiers suffered concussions in the blast.

"There was a luck factor, maybe a guardian angel in the middle somewhere," Bixler said. "I'm lucky to be alive. So is the ANA guy."

PATROL BASE PASHAD, AFGHANISTAN AUG. 19, 2009

Courtesy of Brian Allis

Marine Staff Sgt. Rodrigo Arias-Hernandez, seen during his 2009 deployment to Afghanistan, earned a Bronze Star with "V" for leading a successful defense of Patrol Base Pashad against more than 100 enemy fighters.

'Rambo did stuff like that'

With only five weeks on the ground, the last thing three enlisted American servicemembers defending a mud-walled compound want to hear from a Special Forces commander is, "you guys are crazy for even being here."

He had a point. If military strategists were building a base to test the skills of their fighters, they might devise something like Patrol Base Pashad.

Located just a few miles from the Pakistan border, the primitive compound is susceptible to fire from anyone who pops over the nearby mountain ridgeline.

Meanwhile, the Taliban regularly operates out of one of the nearby villages. The terrain is spiked with roadside bombs, and is so rough that it takes about 40 minutes for a mine-resistant armored vehicle to drive 15 miles from the closest friendly outpost, Patrol Base Penich.

In 2009, Patrol Base Pashad was also positioned on a key route for weapons and opium smuggling, and so despite its strategic flaws, it needed to be held — even if a couple hundred Taliban were coming.

On Aug. 19, "Major Joe" — as is often the case with Special Forces soldiers, he gave only his first name — and 15 other Special Forces soldiers happened to be in the neighborhood on business. They stopped by Pashad to let them know they had intelligence that 100 to 200 fighters might show up in a matter of hours.

Afghanstan was holding elections the next day, and the enemy was keen on keeping voters away from the polls.

Major Joe asked Marine Staff Sgt. Rodrigo Arias-Hernandez, the noncommissioned officer in charge, how many men he had to set up a defense.

He had five — himself, Sgt. Charles Bokis IV, Georgia National Guard Spc. Clark Turner, and two Afghan soldiers.

"Are you kidding?" Major Joe asked.

Staff Sgt. Rodrigo Arias-Hernandez

Bronze Star with "V"

After considering the potential ratio of 40 enemy fighters per allied fighter, Arias-Hernandez wished that he were.

"Rambo did stuff like that," said Arias-Hernandez, 35, of Bethesda, Md. "And I'm no Rambo, either."

Arias-Hernandez spent the next two hours poring over maps, placing his men and planning for potential casualties. The 16 Special Forces soldiers agreed to stay on, improving his options.

"They said, 'This is your show and we don't take anything away from you. We're here to assist,'" Arias-Hernandez said. "That boosted my confidence."

The first mortars came around midnight from the mountains. One round landed close enough to splash Arias-Hernandez with mud and temporarily deafen him.

Small-arms fire then joined the barrage. Arias-Hernandez checked on his Afghan soldiers, and wondered why they weren't firing back.

They couldn't see who they were firing at, they said. Arias-Hernandez pulled out an M203 grenade launcher, fired into the distance, and suddenly, there was light.

"I lit them up in the back, and once they saw that, they started returning fire," Arias-Hernandez said.

The enemy attacked on a moonless night — unusual, since it put them at a disadvantage against Americans equipped with night vision goggles, said Capt. Brian Allis, then a lieutenant and Arias-Hernandez's commanding officer.

SEE 'RAMBO' ON PAGE 28

By Erik Slavin/Stars and Stripes | slavine@pstripes.osd.mil

KANDAHAR PROVINCE, AFGHANISTAN AUG. 24, 2009

Courtesy of Mike Morgan

Lt. Col. Mike Morgan's Kiowa helicopter team flies an armed reconnaissance mission in Kandahar province, Afghanistan, during a yearlong deployment beginning in spring 2009. Morgan earned the Silver Star during a six-hour battle in which his team's efforts kept a ground platoon from being overrun by insurgents.

'It just totally broke loose'

Off a major highway here that the Taliban largely controlled in August 2009, insurgents had a small group of soldiers pinned down for nearly six hours. During that time, with soldiers at times armed with only M4s, it was then-Lt. Col. Mike Morgan's Kiowa helicopter scout team that kept them alive — sometimes flying at a height just above the tree line and shooting at insurgents close enough to see their faces.

This was before the surge when violent districts in the province like Zhari and Arghandab were manned by battalions instead of brigades and forces were spread thin and often hemmed in. Without a lot of combat power on the ground and with the entire province as his task force's responsibility, Morgan, now a colonel, spent most of his yearlong deployment "getting shot at or shooting someone."

"We were living for the ground force," he said.

During his deployment, the 1st Squadron, 17th Cavalry Regiment commander was commended with two Distinguished Flying Crosses and an Army Commendation Medal with "V." And on August 24, 2009, he earned the Silver Star.

Lt. Col. Mike Morgan
Silver Star

Soldiers with an engineer battalion were doing a routine route-clearance patrol, hit a roadside bomb and started taking sporadic fire from the south. They decided this had happened too many times; this they would chase the insurgents south of the highway into what had been an uncontested area.

Two of the convoy vehicles pursued the fighters south of Highway 1 towards Sangsar, the hometown of the Taliban's founder. The insurgents, too, decided to be more aggressive. Rather than slink away after their initial attack, they set up an ambush about half a mile south of the highway.

"All of sudden it just totally broke loose because the insurgents thought they had the tactical advantage," Morgan said.

The insurgents shot rocket-propelled grenades and sprayed automatic fire. The soldiers, isolated from the rest of the convoy and nearly surrounded, radioed for a scout weapons team.

"The ground forces were taking a beating," Morgan said.

Seizing the initiative, the insurgents kept calling in reinforcements from their stronghold south, and over the course of the fight their group grew from about 20 to more than 100.

Morgan and three helicopters flew in, countering with rockets and a .50-caliber machine gun.

"We could not get the insurgents to break contact," he said. "Normally when we have overwhelming firepower they do, but not this day."

The soldiers' lead vehicle took withering fire.

On the radio with one of those soldiers, Morgan said he could "hear the distress in his voice, the rounds bouncing of the MRAPs and into the mud around them."

He had them use a grenade launcher to mark the location of the insurgents' belt-fed machine gun. As Morgan swooped in shooting at the machine gun, the insurgents fired a rocket-propelled grenade at the helicopter. Morgan banked sharply and narrowly avoided the grenade.

"All you can do is come back around," he said.

For hours, the insurgents alternated between shooting at Morgan and his scout weapons team and at the soldiers on the ground.

"It had a rhythm like a sporting game," Morgan said. "It was the same thing again and again and again until we were out of ordnance."

Before twice flying back to the base to refuel and reload, Morgan would make another pass, diving onto the target at a 300-foot altitude right above the tree line so his co-pilot could shoot his M4 rifle at the enemy fighters.

"That's blatantly dangerous," Morgan said. "There's a lot of risk. But... you have no choice. If you don't do it, they're going to die."

They shot hundreds upon hundreds of rounds, and Morgan was able to take out the insurgents' machine gun with a rocket, even though it was very close to the soldiers.

When Morgan's two teams of three helicopters had chased the insurgents off almost six hours later, they had helicopters riddled with bullet holes. His helicopter had grenade fragments in the tail wing.

"We tore up a lot of bad people that day," he said. "And none of our boys died."

By Megan McCloskey/Stars and Stripes | mccloskeym@stripes.osd.mil | Twitter: @MegMcCloskey

HENDOR VILLAGE, AFGHANISTAN

MAY 4, 2010

'There's only so much cover'

Staff Sgt. Grant Derrick
Silver Star

Staff Sgt. Justin Schafer
Silver Star

Capt. Tim Driscoll
Bronze Star with "V" and Army Commendation Medal with "V"

Staff Sgt. Grant Derrick lay sprawled across the limp body of a wounded Afghan soldier, behind a too-short pile of rocks, with hundreds of bullets smashing the ground around him, and waited to die.

"I kept thinking, 'This is not the way I thought it would end,'" he said. "I was in the worst situation I could possibly imagine."

For 13 soldiers from the 3rd Special Forces Group, that mission in May 2010 turned out to be more dangerous than most of them ever feared.

Their early morning push into Hendor village in northern Afghanistan was designed to help secure areas around Kabul in advance of the June 2010 peace jirga. Capt. Tim Driscoll said his team had already faced long firefights all across Laghman province in previous months, so they expected strong resistance when they reached Hendor.

But even before the mission began, things started to go wrong. Problems with the helicopter landing zone left them farther outside the village than planned, and the noise as the aircraft circled ruined any chance of a stealthy entrance.

By the time Operational Detachment Alpha 3336 arrived at dawn, Driscoll said, the village was a ghost town, with most of the locals — and all of the young men — already hiding in the nearby mountainside.

"The first building we got to, there was a large weapons cache inside," said Staff Sgt. Jermon Tibbs, the squad's forensic specialist. "As we started to go through the items, that's when the shooting started."

Tibbs and Sgt. 1st Class Daniel Plants took the weapons cache out of the village to detonate it, but quickly found themselves pinned down. Even behind the buildings farthest from the mountainside, troops found little protection.

The village covers less than a square mile, but the soldiers said its rocky terrain and narrow alleys made walking treacherous. Enemy bullets came down like rain, almost vertically from the high ground above, Tibbs said.

"And from then on, for the rest of the day, we were getting shot at," he said. "Every open area, we got shot at. When we got behind some cover, we got shot at. For the first hour there, we just stayed low, trying to figure out where exactly they were shooting from."

Two Afghan commandos were killed early in the fight. Another was hit with a bullet that entered beside his nose and burst through under his chin. As Master Sgt. Sean Berk dragged the wounded man into an empty house, Staff Sgt. Justin Schafer realized he had been hit as well.

"I had noticed the rounds getting closer and closer, but I didn't realize I had been hit twice in my aid bag," the 29-year-old medic said. "The whole thing was smashed."

The damaged equipment forced Driscoll to send the other squad medic, Derrick, across the village to help Schafer tend to the wounded.

Until then, his men had been working in three teams, each leading dozens of Afghan commandos into different sections of the village. Derrick said he only had to cover about 400 yards to get from one side of the village to the other, but every step was met with gunfire.

"There were so many spider holes, you couldn't distinguish where the fire was coming from," he said. "You're just hauling ass, because there's only so much cover when they're firing straight down at you."

Hours into the day, as the two medics tried to set up a safe casualty collection point, the rest of the teams moved ahead with the mission. Coalition aircraft peppered the mountainside with rockets and 500-pound bombs, but with mixed results. Driscoll directed his soldiers and the commandos to new positions, trying to counter the threat.

At one point, his own position was blanketed with fire from two different groups of enemy fighters. Driscoll had to dash through 100 yards of open space to establish a new command post. Even as bullets ricocheted inches from him, soldiers said Driscoll continued to bark out orders, enabling them and the Afghan commandos to regroup safely on the village's southern end.

The team pushed through the village searching for more weapons. Tibbs was pulled from that detail to rush an injured Afghan named Ullah to Schafer's makeshift clinic. Shot through the face, Ullah was still alive, but struggling to breathe.

Derrick said he and Schafer made the call to evacuate the man — and three other wounded commandos — as quickly as possible. Medevac pilots relayed their anticipated landing zone, and Ullah was placed on a litter for the dangerous dash uphill.

"It wasn't an ideal spot, and as we came around a corner, they let loose on us," Schafer said.

The group immediately scattered. Tibbs and Schafer found cover behind nearby buildings. The helicopters circled away. After the commandos dove for safety, Derrick was caught in the open with the litter and wounded man.

"He had no body armor, no helmet. He was completely exposed," Derrick said of Ullah. "He got hit again in the leg. I drug him behind a broken rock pile, not even a meter high, and then I basically lied on top of him, returning fire."

Derrick was grazed in the ankle by a bullet. He had been shot in the shoulder during a mission four months earlier, and the new injury — though minor

SEE COVER ON PAGE 23

Staff Sgt. Jermon Tibbs
Bronze Star with "V"

Staff Sgt. Ben Geesaman
Sgt. 1st Class Daniel Plants
Bronze Star with "V" and Army Commendation Medal with "V"

Staff Sgt. Benjamin James
Master Sgt. Sean Berk
Sgt. 1st Class Ray Ysasaga
Warrant Officer Joe Vasquez
Bronze Star with "V"

Staff Sgt. Jeffery Carroll
Sgt. 1st Class Eric Wagner
Sgt. 1st Class Silas Palance
Army Commendation Medal with "V"

By Leo Shane III/Stars and Stripes | shanel@stripes.osd.mil | Twitter: @LeoShane

KANDAHAR PROVINCE, AFGHANISTAN JULY 9, 2010

‘I could feel the rocks spraying in my face’

It started with a group of Afghan soldiers inviting their U.S. military mentors to tea and ended with one of the Afghans dead on the ground, 18 bullets lodged in the wall and U.S. troops with rifles trained on their would-be allies.

Soldiers from the 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment had just started a year-long deployment to Maiwand district in southern Afghanistan and members of the regiment’s 3rd Squadron had been tasked with mentoring Afghan soldiers during a mission to secure a stretch of highway west of Kandahar.

The soldiers, on only their second mission, arrived at the Afghan National Army compound in Hutal, the largest town in Maiwand, on July 9 and introduced themselves to the Afghan personnel they’d be working with.

“The ANA commander wanted us to drink chai (tea) with him,” 1st Lt. Connor Lawrence, a platoon leader, said. “He insisted on chai.”

Lawrence, several noncommissioned officers and two interpreters sat down at a table to drink tea with their hosts. But as the drinks were poured, the Afghans moved away from the table.

“This was awkward,” Staff Sgt. Diess Solon said. “I’d been offered chai many times [on past deployments] and there wasn’t one time where they offered us chai and didn’t drink it with us.”

Suddenly an Afghan soldier came around the corner, pointed his AK-47 at the Americans and started shooting.

Some of the Americans didn’t know what was happening and thought the badly placed shots whizzing over their heads might have been fired accidentally or even coming from outside the wire.

Sgt. Michael Adams, 26, a veteran of combat in Baghdad, grasped the situation immediately.

“As soon as I saw he was shooting at us, he was no longer ANA,” he said.

Adams raised his rifle but it malfunctioned. Unconsciously, he ejected the dud round and dropped to the ground while firing four well-aimed bullets into his target.

The wounded insurgent went down but kept fighting.

Sgt. Michael Adams
Bronze Star with “V”

“He rolled onto his right hand side and fired a long burst that hit about a foot from me,” Adams said. “I thought I was dead. I was completely exposed lying on the ground with a guy shooting at me about 10 feet away.”

Several bullets passed within inches of the Adams’ head.

“The impacts were all around me,” he said. “I could feel the rocks spraying in my face.”

Adams told himself that he was a dead man but he didn’t want his comrades to meet the same fate. He leveled his rifle and pumped four more bullets into the Afghan soldier, ending the fight.

By that stage, it was clear that the tea party was not going to resume. Eighteen bullets had lodged in the wall behind the table where the U.S. soldiers sat. They didn’t know where another attack might come from.

“One [Afghan] guy was saying: ‘It’s OK. Let’s continue the mission,’” Solon said.

But the Americans had decided that was enough action for one day.

“We consolidated back to the vehicles and moved out and kept our barrels on them,” said Staff Sgt. David Fordyce.

Courtesy of the U.S. Army

Col. James Blackburn, commander of the 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment, pins the Bronze Star with “V” on Sgt. Michael Adams.

A subsequent investigation turned up al-Qaida videos on the dead Afghan soldier’s cell phone and evidence that he’d recently been to Pakistan, Lawrence said.

“The guy that shot had just showed up at the compound,” he said. “There were four brand new guys and I’m guessing those four guys had infiltrated the ANA.”

None of the other ANA soldiers was detained as a result of the incident but some of the Americans think it was part of a Taliban campaign to kill international personnel working with the ANA.

“This was happening all over Afghanistan,” Fordyce said. “A few days later, it happened in Helmand. They had planted some guys in there. They said: ‘OK, this is the week. We will go and try to kill some dudes and try to hurt the relationship between American forces and the ANA.’”

For his quick reaction and accurate fire, Adams was awarded the Bronze Star with “V.”

By Seth Robson/Stars and Stripes | robsons@stripes.osd.mil

Cover: ‘But you couldn’t stop to think about it. You just had to keep going’

FROM PAGE 22

— washed a sense of dread over him.

“I was upset about me, I was worried about the patient,” he said. “I was surprised I hadn’t already been hit more than just in the ankle.”

Tibbs climbed a rock wall to return fire and attempt to pull the shooters’ attention from Derrick. The commandos joined in from farther back. Schafer inched through the gunfire to Derrick’s position.

“I didn’t think [Ullah] was going to make it to begin with, even before he got shot the second time,” Schafer said. “I told Derrick later that if we were selfish, we could have gotten out of there easily without him. But at the time, that never crossed out minds.”

The three made their way out of the shooting gallery, at one point tossing Ullah over a short wall in a desperate attempt to find cover. Remarkably, the pair said, the man survived that, and even seemed more alert after some battlefield first aid.

Nearby, other soldiers found another large cache of weapons and drugs. Driscoll ordered it destroyed, and the medics saw the news as their best chance for escape.

“The blast took out four houses and created a giant wall of smoke,” Driscoll said. “We could barely see, but we got out of there.”

Tibbs, Schafer and Derrick reconnected at the edge of the village, and managed to hold off enemy fire long enough to load all of the wounded Afghans onto a medevac helicopter at a slightly safer landing area. As it flew off, they heard Driscoll ordering troops to counter dozens of enemy fighters at the other end of the village, trying to wipe out the detachment.

By then, the men had already been fighting for more than eight hours. The fighting was so fierce that most hadn’t had a chance to catch their breath, and all were fighting dehydration and exhaustion.

“But you couldn’t stop to think about it,” Driscoll said. “You just had to keep going.”

After more close calls and another hour of fighting, the soldiers pushed the enemy back again. Driscoll and several others were down to their last few rounds when Driscoll gave the order to pull out. By then another operational detachment had entered the fight, relieving them.

The soldiers said they continued to take gunfire until the moment the last transport aircraft flew out of range.

Army officials credited the unit with killing 30 enemy fighters on the day, and pushing back at least 50 more trying to retake the village. Despite the daylong barrage, none of the 13 U.S. soldiers was killed or seriously injured.

Driscoll credited that to the unit’s professionalism and focus, although Schafer admitted he’s still shocked that they all survived.

All 13 men received their medals of valor at a ceremony in North Carolina in February. Derrick and Schafer received the Silver Star for their heroism in protecting Ullah. Driscoll, Tibbs and six others were awarded the Bronze Star with “V.”

In the days following the firefight, U.S. forces opted to withdraw from the village rather than hold it. Schafer said the goal was simply to clear the area temporarily to help secure the larger region, though several of the soldiers hoped they’d have another chance to go back and “finish the job.”

The two Afghan commandos killed early in the fight were the only fatalities of the mission. The wounded, including Ullah, all survived. Weeks later, the two medics met with him in an Afghan hospital and, unhappy with the care he was receiving, brought him back to their base for his recovery.

Driscoll said that speaks to the connection his men made with the Afghans. Derrick echoed that sentiment.

“If we all didn’t have that bond, it would have been a worse day,” he said.

BAGRAM AIR FIELD, AFGHANISTAN MARCH 18, 2010

'I didn't have a lot of good options'

At first, it looked to be an all too common injury at one of the busiest trauma hospitals in Afghanistan: a cartridge — used as shrapnel in a roadside bomb blast — lodged in the skull of an Afghan soldier. But when radiologist Dr. (Lt. Col.) Anthony Terreri took a closer look at a high-resolution CAT scan March 18, 2010, he saw that the round was not entirely made of metal.

Photos courtesy of the U.S. Air Force

This computerized scan shows a 14.5mm high-explosive incendiary round that Bagram Air Field's head trauma surgeon, Dr. (Maj.) John Bini, removed from the scalp of an Afghan National Army soldier.

He showed the scan to Bagram Air Field's head trauma surgeon Dr. (Maj.) John Bini.

"You could see that it was a metal jacket with something else inside," Bini said.

That something else was about 5 grams of explosive.

Bini called the bomb squad.

Removing unexploded ordnance from a patient is one of the lesser-used skills of military trauma surgeons. Nearly all surgeons go their entire career without ever encountering such a case. But Bini knew the protocol, having taught classes on that very subject to students at Wilford Hall Medical Center at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas.

Dr. (Maj.) John Bini
Bronze Star

"We have certain principles," Bini said. "One is you try to recognize these things before it ends up in your operating room."

But it was too late for that, as the soldier had just been wheeled into surgery. So Bini evacuated the hospital but for a few surgeons and patients in mid-operation. All the electrical equipment was shut off out of fear that a stray spark could ignite the round.

Anesthesiologist Maj. Jeffrey Rengel put on body armor and administered anesthesia intravenously, counting the drips per minute. The patient's vitals were taken with a blood pressure cuff and battery-operated heart monitor wrapped around his toe.

The explosive ordinance disposal team arrived and confirmed what the doctors had first recognized — that the metal object was, in fact, a live 14.5mm high explosive round.

■ To watch an interview with Drs. Bini and Rengel, go to **stripes.com/heroes/bini**

"At the end of it, you could see an impact detonator," Bini said.

Found all over Afghanistan, the Soviet-era machine gun ammunition, which is about 2.5 inches in length, was likely packed around the roadside bomb to increase the blast's power and cause further damage as shrapnel. Though the round does not typically have a sensitive fusing system, there was no telling whether the blast had compromised it.

Bini decided that he, among the surgeons, would have to remove the ordnance from the soldier's head.

"You're taught to use your most expendable person," he said. "But I didn't have a lot of good options. Everyone else was operating, and my neurosurgeon wasn't expendable. He was the only U.S. neurosurgeon in the entire country. His surgical skill was much more valuable than my fingers."

Were the round to ignite, it would have nowhere to go, meaning that Bini's fingers and face would receive the full brunt of the resulting explosion.

Bini threw on his own body armor and joined Rengel in the operating room, along with a member of the EOD team, who offered him a piece of advice just prior to the surgery: not to drop the ordnance.

With that in mind, Bini made a circular incision around the bullet, pulling back the scalp to reveal the round, wedged underneath the right side of the soldier's skull bone.

He grabbed the bullet with his hand and pulled it out. The EOD team member took the round and disposed of it. The neurosurgeon was called in to finish the surgery. A few weeks later, the Afghan soldier was released from the hospital without any major cognitive damage, only a bit of weakness in the left side of his face.

"We have certain principles. One is you try to recognize these things before it ends up in your operating room."

Dr. (Maj.) John Bini
On his encounter with a live round in a patient's head

The round Bini removed from the Afghan soldier's scalp.

Accounts of live-ordnance removal are rare in the medical literature, but a retrospective study found 36 cases going back to World War II, Bini said. Of those 36 patients, 32 survived the removal of the ordnance from their bodies.

Bini was awarded the Bronze Star for his recent tour in Afghanistan, not only for the removal of the round but also for the 2,600 surgeries he and his team of doctors performed.

He said the story of the unexploded ordnance, widely covered in the media, had overshadowed much of the team's other work at Bagram, including treating 13 patients injured when a shura meeting was bombed. The team also used a catheter to perform dialysis on a 13-year-old Afghan girl dying of kidney failure, and saved the lives of eight patients who were on ventilators when the electricity went off.

"Some of that stuff," Bini said, "is a lot more amazing than cutting out a little piece of metal."

By Seth Robbins/Stars and Stripes | robbinss@estripes.osd.mil

LaCrosse: Aircraft evacuated 11 soldiers while facing heavy fire

FROM PAGE 11

The helicopters were scarred from the earlier barrage of small-arms fire, but the crews managed to land and pick up the wounded Germans at an alternate landing zone without further incident.

The firefight continued on for an additional six hours. Over a period of three hours, LaCrosse and two other aircraft conducted three separate missions — two under heavy fire — and evacuated 11 soldiers.

When it was over, three German soldiers had died and eight were wounded.

"By flying in, he saved at least three more comrades," said Bonneik.

Months later, LaCrosse was awarded the Silver Star. Thirteen other soldiers received the Distinguished Flying Cross. All 14 crewmembers were awarded the German Gold Cross for Valor, Germany's second-highest military award. They became the first soldiers outside the German military to receive the award.

"By flying in, he saved at least three more comrades."

Master Sgt. Patrick Bonneik
German joint terminal attack controller

URUZGAN PROVINCE, AFGHANISTAN JUNE 11, 2007

‘The round impacts were all around us’

When the 12-man Special Forces team arrived at the site of the ambush, the Afghan troops were in dire straits. Some were huddled in a shallow well to the right of the road, and more were pinned down in a mud compound to the left. It was June 11, 2007, in Uruzgan province, and the Special Forces team was on a month-long patrol to prevent the Taliban from moving freely from village to village, said Master Sgt. Antonio Gonzalez, who on that day was a sergeant first class.

Courtesy of the U.S. Army

Sgt. 1st Class Mark Roland provides overwatch during a 2007 mission to clear the Cahar Cineh Valley in Afghanistan. Roland and Sgt. 1st Class Antonio Gonzalez earned the Silver Star for rescuing Afghan soldiers from an attack by insurgents.

■ To watch interviews with Roland and Gonzalez, go to **stripes.com/heroes/gonzalezroland**

Sgt. 1st Class Mark Roland
Silver Star

Sgt. 1st Class Antonio Gonzalez
Silver Star

The Afghan troops were escorting the unit’s three supply trucks to meet the team when they ran into about 80 insurgents armed with small arms, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars.

“We heard the shots fired and we kind of looked at each other like, ‘What’s that?’” Gonzalez said.

When they figured out what was going on, they wasted little time. The team got into its vehicles and raced toward the sound of gunfire in a “hooking maneuver,” going north and then cutting back south toward the besieged Afghan troops, catching the Taliban off guard.

Gonzalez saw an enemy fighter with a belt-fed weapon and radio — then promptly shot him dead.

Arriving on the scene, Sgt. 1st Class Mark Roland’s Humvee came upon enemy fighters maneuvering in a dry drainage trench below.

“An enemy jumped up directly to the side of our vehicle, about six to 10 feet away and he shot his AK-47 on automatic up the entire side of the vehicle,” said Roland, now a chief warrant officer 2.

The rounds pelted the side of the Humvee, the windshield and the turret. The gunner also was struck, his armored chest plate saving his life.

Roland dropped a fragmentary grenade into the six-foot deep trench, waited for it to explode, and then jumped in.

The enemy fighter was on the ground about 15 feet away and reaching for his weapon. Roland shot him before he could grab it.

As Roland was taking the dead man’s weapon and ammunition off of him, a second enemy fighter appeared in the trench.

Roland’s rifle misfired.

“My driver said, ‘I see him, I got him,’ and he engaged him,” Roland said.

Roland and the driver eased through the rest of the trench system, stopping every 10 or 15 yards to drop grenades or shoot into well holes, just to make sure no Taliban remained.

After they got back into the Humvee, Roland spotted about eight Afghan soldiers hiding in the shallow well, so two Humvees got as close to them as possible and Roland ran more than 30 yards to them.

He had an interpreter explain that he wanted half of the Afghans to run to his vehicle and half to go to the other, but they didn’t want to move.

“The position was untenable for everybody at that point in time,” Roland said. “It was not a place to be hanging out, with the enemy firing from three sides around you and knowing exactly where you’re at and what you’re up to. The round impacts were all around us and they were only intensifying.”

Roland grabbed a few of the Afghan troops, pulled them out of the hole and escorted them into the back of his vehicle.

“That kind of initiated the whole action,” he said. “No one else wanted to stay in that hole if other people were leaving it.”

Roland made two trips back into the hole to grab more troops and their weapons.

“That’s time I felt the most exposed,” said Roland, who received a Silver Star for his efforts. “The jig was up, everybody out there on that battlefield could see what was happening.”

Meanwhile, Gonzalez spotted Afghan troops in the mud compound. He waved for them to come toward him, but they would not. They were taking heavy fire.

Gonzalez flashed a mischievous smile in the direction of his gunner.

“Hey,” he said. “I’ll be back.”

Zigzagging and firing as he dashed through the kill zone, he finally made it to the Afghans. He covered them as they sprinted to safety.

“I made it back to our truck and asked, ‘Hey, do we have everybody?’ They gave me the thumbs up,” Gonzalez said.

Then he glanced back at the compound and saw that more Afghan soldiers had moved into it.

“OK, that’s not everybody,” he said.

Once again, Gonzalez ran to help Afghan troops get back to safety. And once again, as soon as he got back to his Humvee, he looked back and saw more to be rescued.

“Third time is usually the time that you get hit, because after the first and second time, those snipers are pretty much calculating their misses, so I’m sure the third time they’ll get it right,” Gonzalez said.

But he made it to the compound again, and this time, he looked around to make sure there weren’t any more Afghan troops outside.

On the way back a final time, something told him stop in his tracks. As soon as he did, bullets whizzed by his face.

“The Lord was on my side that day,” he said.

When it was all over, Gonzalez had rescued 15 Afghan soldiers and earned his own Silver Star.

“After that day, they were devoted to the team,” he said. “We built a bridge between us and them that was difficult to break.”

Sgt. 1st Class Antonio Gonzalez attends a memorial service for a fallen Afghan National Security Force member.

By Jeff Schogol/Stars and Stripes | jeffrey.schogol@stripes.osd.mil | Twitter: @JeffSchogol

NEAR KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN JULY 29, 2009

'I wasn't about to give up'

Two Pave Hawk medical evacuation helicopters raced over the barren Afghan terrain near Kandahar, unsure exactly what they were about to encounter at their destination.

"The voice on the radio was pretty hysterical. … 'We are being engaged and we're under attack. Someone's bleeding.' Just over and over, screaming into the radio," said Air Force Capt. Luke Will, a co-pilot aboard one of the Pave Hawk helicopters, designated Pedro 16, during a July 29, 2009, rescue mission for the 129th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron out of Kandahar Air Field.

When the two helicopters crested a ridgeline, they found a U.S. Army convoy of mine-resistant, ambush-protected (MRAP) vehicles struck by an improvised explosive device and left idle and exposed. The second vehicle was smoking from the blast, and three soldiers were seriously wounded.

From somewhere on the surrounding landscape, Taliban fighters fired down on the convoy, and two Army Kiowa Warrior helicopters circled the scene, trying to work out some coordination in the chaos.

Pedro 16 was there to get the wounded out. But the protracted rescue and firefight that unfolded earned the air crew the Mackay Trophy for most meritorious Air Force flight of 2009.

The Pedro 16 pilot, Capt. Robert Rosebrough, was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross with valor, and the other members of the air crew — Will, Staff Sgt. Tim Philpott and Master Sgt. Dustin Thomas — each received the Air Medal with valor.

The embattled Army convoy was caught in a "perfect ambush scenario" and the soldiers hunkered down in their vehicles against fire from AK-47s and a DShK heavy machine gun, Will said. Pink smoke wafted through the air from the convoy, signaling the rescue helicopters where to land and load the wounded.

In a hasty extraction plan worked out with the Kiowa crews, Pedro 16 would lay down suppressive fire along a wadi and grove of trees where the Taliban were hiding. The lead Pave Hawk would swoop into the landing zone for the wounded soldiers.

"As soon as his wheel touched the ground, on the radio, he said, 'Taking fire, taking fire,'" Will said. "He was already pulling power and on the go again."

But as the lead Pave Hawk pulled away, it began to list. There was ominous radio silence.

Finally, a broken message came over the radio.

"'Co-pilot bleeding, something, something,'" Will recalled hearing. "It's all just kind of garbled."

The lead Pave Hawk had touched down near the convoy and taken direct fire. The co-pilot had been wounded in the arm and leg by shrapnel. Blood was soaking through her flight suit. Two of the crew's pararescue jumpers had gotten off the helicopter before it pulled up.

"Now, there are two PJs on the ground in the dust cloud also getting shot at," Will said. "They sprint up to the convoy to help out."

Pedro 16 zeroed in on the grove of trees where the Taliban had taken up positions while the lead Pave Hawk took another run at loading the jumpers and the wounded soldiers.

Philpott opened up on the grove with the helicopter's mini-gun, a devastating .30-caliber weapon that fires 2,000 rounds per minute, killing two Taliban fighters and possibly a third.

When the mini-gun jammed, Philpott and Thomas, the flight crew gunner, began firing their M4 carbines.

"I wasn't about to give up," Thomas told Stars and Stripes during an interview in 2010.

The crew of the lead Pave Hawk continued to take fire as it loaded the three casualties and the two PJs and pulled away from the landing zone.

As the Kiowas pounded the Taliban, the two rescue helicopters flew from the ambush site, hugging the terrain. But within just miles, the evacuation took another bad turn as Pedro 16 lost sight of the Pave Hawk carrying the casualties.

Courtesy of the U.S. Air Force

The air crew of Pedro 16 poses with other members of the 129th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron in Afghanistan in summer 2009. Capt. Luke Will, top right, Staff Sgt. Tim Philpott, bottom right, Capt. Robert Rosebrough, standing, center, and Master Sgt. Dustin Thomas, top left, received the Mackay Trophy for most meritorious Air Force flight of the year after a 2009 mission that rescued wounded servicemembers from an ambushed convoy and a downed medical evacuation helicopter.

Capt. Robert Rosebrough
Distinguished Flying Cross

Capt. Luke Will
Staff Sgt. Tim Philpott
Master Sgt. Dustin Thomas
Air Medal with "V"

As the air crew crested a hill, the desert opened up before them and the other helicopter suddenly came into view. It was sitting on the ground in the middle of the barren expanse, its rotor blades still and its radios silent.

"We knew they took a bunch of shots, we knew they got the patients onboard," Will said. "Now, they're a mile out in front of us turned around and shut down."

Pedro 16 moved low over the desert toward the downed aircraft. As Will looked out the window, he watched little puffs of dust rising from the dry earth below. It took him a moment to comprehend that the helicopter was being shot at again.

With a new threat looming, the crew of the downed rescue helicopter took up defensive positions around the aircraft as Pedro 16 orbited overhead. A PJ on the ground radioed that the helicopter had too many malfunctions to fly and that the crew was taking direct fire from a rock mountainside to the north.

"We just kind of troll up looking for someone almost to engage us versus engaging the guys on the ground," Will said. "We're just meandering our way up these rock valleys and this rock face."

Pedro 16 could not find the enemy positions, and after firing a burst into the mountainside, their mini-gun was jammed and the downed helicopter was still under attack.

With options evaporating, Rosebrough devised a plan to evacuate the casualties and the imperiled air crew using the Kiowa helicopters. In a rare move, six servicemembers on the ground would climb onto the landing skids of the Kiowas to get out of the ambush site while the rest of the downed aircraft crew and the injured patients would board Pedro 16.

The servicemembers "would sit on the skids, find something to clip a carabiner to … and hold on," Will said. "The Kiowas were all for it."

The helicopters swooped into the site and the crew loaded on board in a sweep of dust and bullets. The Kiowas pulled away with the servicemembers. As Pedro 16 prepared for takeoff, Rosebrough and Will watched the small puffs of dust from incoming bullets move in a line across the desert floor directly toward the helicopter.

Philpott, firing out of the helicopter with his M4, called across the radio for everyone to immediately get on board for takeoff. The air crew with casualties rushed into the aircraft under heavy fire. After a quick head count, Pedro 16 pulled up and away from the firefight.

"We were like, 'That was one hell of a day,'" Will said.

But it wasn't over yet.

An unexpected message came over the radio: "You guys forgot us. We're still on the ground."

The Kiowas were meant to take six troops, but had only evacuated three. That meant three were still on the ground and under fire.

The Pedro 16 crew did the quick math for taking on three more passengers. The added weight would likely hobble the helicopter and keep it from getting more than 10 feet off the ground.

"Only having enough power to hover at 10 feet is pretty risky," Will said.

SEE PEDRO ON PAGE 27

By Travis J. Tritten/Stars and Stripes | trittent@pstripes.osd.mil

FARAH AND HERAT PROVINCES, AFGHANISTAN — JUNE 26, 2008

‘Guys called for me, so I went’

The terrain was ideal for an ambush.

“To our west and to our east was high cliff faces,” said Army Staff Sgt. Jonathan Clouse. “To the south was the entrance to the canyon that we had come in through, and to the north there was a box canyon.”

It was June 26, 2008, and Clouse, a medic, was a Special Forces liaison to Marine Special Operations Company H, Special Operations Task Force – 73. He and his team would be caught in a four-hour firefight after which he was awarded the Silver Star for braving a tsunami of fire to treat wounded.

The team was on a patrol looking for a suspected insurgent location on the border of Farah and Herat provinces in Afghanistan that took them through the canyon with almost vertical walls. Suddenly, their path was blocked by a small truck with a flatbed and a disabled Toyota Land Cruiser.

The sun was not up yet, but there was enough pre-dawn light to see as the team got out of their Humvee and walked deeper into the canyon.

“As we pushed in, we started seeing kind of more and more signs of recent enemy activity,” he said. “That little voice in my head started going ‘ding, ding, ding, there’s something not right here.’”

He could see a lot of spent 7.62x54 shell casings spread all over the ground, suggesting someone with a sniper rifle had been active there recently.

■ To watch an interview with Clouse, go to **stripes.com/heroes/clouse**

“Then I actually found a spot where the guy who was shooting the sniper rifle had been laying down,” Clouse said. “I was able to see the imprint of his body, of his elbows and of his toes where he had been laying in to sight that rifle in.”

Courtesy of the U.S. Army

Staff Sgt. Jonathan Clouse prepares to depart on a mission in western Afghanistan. Clouse was awarded the Silver Star for his treatment of wounded servicemembers while under heavy fire.

Just as he was processing this information, the enemy opened fire from the cliffs above with machine guns, sniper rifles and possibly rocket propelled grenades.

“It was very hard at first to localize where the shooting was,” he said. “We knew we were being shot at by the people above us, but we were essentially in a box canyon, and so they could be almost 360 degrees around us shooting down.”

To add to the confusion, the U.S. troops’ voices echoed in the canyon as they all yelled, “Where are they?”

“In the opening shots, several guys were hit: two Marines took hits in the upper leg and at least two Afghan National Army soldiers were hit at that point,” Clouse said. “So over the next little bit, seconds to a minute or so, guys were kind of moving in trying to find a covered concealed position and the guys on the cliffs above us to the north were really laying into us really hard.”

Staff Sgt. Jonathan Clouse
Silver Star

Clouse and members of the Marine team took cover behind a Humvee, which offered a very narrow space where they weren’t exposed to the enemy. Clouse was treating a Marine who had been shot in the upper thigh when the team corpsman came up to him and asked where the other wounded Marine was.

“As he asked that, he was hit — the corpsman was struck by a round that hit him in the center-left of his back and exited the kind of center right of his abdomen, so he went down right there,” Clouse said. “So I dragged him behind cover and started to treat him.”

Meanwhile, the other wounded Marine, Staff Sgt. Edgar A. Heredia, lay motionless in the open. Figuring Heredia was either dead or close to death, Clouse continued to treat the corpsman until Marines dragged him to cover.

“I moved to their location to their location and I assessed and I tried to treat Staff Sgt. Heredia, but he died shortly after I got there,” Clouse, who kept telling the story without breaking stride.

As the fight wore on, more wounded servicemembers made their way to the Humvee, where Clouse tended to them.

After a while, it became clear that the aircraft who had been called in to bomb the insurgents were not hitting their targets due to the terrain. The medevac helicopters could not reach the team and were running low on fuel.

“So we kind of cooked up a little course of action that we would — through the cover of airstrikes and throwing smoke grenades — we would try to move guys in onesies and twosies, leapfrogging from cover to cover within the kill zone to get us out.

“We began to do that and it took quite a while: The airstrike would come, we’d know the airstrike was inbound, we’d throw smoke, airstrike would hit, everyone would open up with everything they had while two or three guys might run to the next little piece of cover, and we kept moving guys like that,” he said.

Every time he moved, he was exposed to fire.

“I took a lot of fragmentary and shrapnel injuries,” he said. “I was hit once in the weapon, twice in the armor and once through the pant leg.”

One Marine managed to climb the cliffs to a point where he could shoot at the insurgents with his machine gun, providing critical cover that helped the team get all of the wounded out of the kill zone.

“We were able to get that MARSOC corpsman onto the helicopter and he ended up surviving,” Clouse said.

Of the six U.S. and Afghan servicemembers Clouse treated that day, all but Heredia survived.

Clouse credits his Special Forces training for allowing him to move from one wounded servicemember to another under such intense fire.

“I don’t remember a whole lot of internal debate about whether to go or not,” he said. “There were guys who were dying and they needed my assistance and the guys called for me, so I went.”

By Jeff Schogol/Stars and Stripes | jeffrey.schogol@stripes.osd.mil | Twitter: @JeffSchogol

Pedro: Pave Hawk crew’s risky maneuvers saved servicemembers’ lives

FROM PAGE 26

“If anything goes wrong, you don’t have any power to pull away. It is the absolute minimum power margin.”

He passed the grim information to Rosebrough.

According to Will, Rosebrough dismissed the warnings and swung the Pave Hawk around to go back for those left behind.

At Will’s suggestion, Pedro 16 landed on the far side of the downed helicopter to use it as cover for the pickup. The three climbed aboard and Rosebrough punched the thrust on the helicopter.

“He pulls to the max limit of what the helicopter has in terms of power and it just inches off the ground,” Will said.

The overloaded Pave Hawk moved slowly across the desert in a nerve-racking attempt to gain speed and altitude. Eventually it happened — the helicopter pulled away with its crew and casualties.

Pedro 16 caught up with the Kiowas and passed them on the way back to Kandahar.

“We see two of the air crew members sitting on the skids [of the Kiowas] out of the right side. They’re looking over to us waving,” Will said. “It was just this unreal scene.”

KANDAHAR CITY, AFGHANISTAN

NOV. 17, 2010

'He jumped into action'

Courtesy of the U.S. Army

Gen. David Petraeus congratulates Pvt. Marcus Montez, a medic assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, on Dec. 20, 2010, at Camp Nathan Smith, Afghanistan. Montez received the Soldier's Medal for saving the life of an Afghan infant.

It was, on this day, no rare thing to see crowds celebrating in the streets of Kandahar City.

The 30 Afghans huddled in front of a string of huts in the small Shurandam neighborhood didn't seem out of place on Nov. 17, 2010, the second day of Eid al-Adha, the Muslim holiday commemorating Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son at God's command.

But almost immediately, Pvt. Marcus Montez, a 20-year-old medic on only his second mission since arriving in Afghanistan, heard a sound that told him celebration had been overtaken by panic and desperation.

Pvt. Marcus Montez
Soldier's Medal

A tormented wail rose from the center of the crowd, and Montez and the rest of his dismounted fire team ran toward the source. Pushing their way through, they found a young woman cradling the lifeless body of her infant daughter.

"He jumped into action and didn't hesitate at all," said Sgt. Ryan Mauk, Montez's squad leader that day.

No interpreter was available but Montez persuaded the mother to let him assess the child, as the other soldiers made certain that he had room to work.

The child wasn't breathing, and Montez found no pulse. He immediately began CPR, mixing abdominal thrusts and blows to the back. Then he saw the problem.

A necklace, just string and beads, was choking the child to death.

"It was twisted around her neck," said Montez, now a private first class. "Maybe the kid was playing with it or it got caught on something."

As more curious Afghans drifted over, Montez reached for his scissors, snipped off the necklace and resumed CPR.

Within seconds, Montez said, "The baby just started crying. She came back to life."

A second fire team, including an interpreter, arrived moments later. The little girl's vital signs stabilized. Through the interpreter, the girl's family and a village elder heaped gratitude on Montez and his fellow soldiers.

"They were really thankful and they shook all of our hands and they invited us to stay for dinner," Montez said.

The soldiers declined politely, explaining that they had other areas to patrol before the evening ended. Less than half an hour after coming upon the dying child, the soldiers were on their way and, in that moment, Montez recognized only that he'd done his job. No more, no less.

A month later, Gen. David Petraeus, commander of the Afghan war effort, visited Camp Nathan Smith, where he congratulated Montez and presented him with a certificate indicating that he'd been awarded the Soldier's Medal, the highest honor the Army bestows for heroism in a noncombat situation.

The award is so rare — only four have been presented in nearly a decade of action in Afghanistan — that the actual medal had to be ordered and shipped from the States. It didn't arrive in time for the general's visit.

Petraeus wrote the book on the U.S. military's particular brand of counterinsurgency, penning a manual in 2006 that the U.S. has used as it works to pacify Iraq and Afghanistan. Killing enemy fighters is a critical part of the mission, but so too is winning the trust and respect of the local population.

Montez saved a child's life that day, and the goodwill lingered.

"That neighborhood is a rural community. There's not a lot of people there and they don't see U.S. activity very much," Mauk said earlier this year. "When we get down into that area, they're very cooperative with us and we get the help we need when we need it."

By Derek Turner/Stars and Stripes | turnerd@stripes.osd.mil | Twitter: @DerekTurnerDC

'Rambo': Arias-Hernandez prayed in moments between battles

FROM PAGE 18

Allis maintained communication with Arias-Hernandez from Patrol Base Penich. He had moved to Penich earlier, thinking it was a more likely point of conflict because of the major voting centers nearby.

"That turned out not to be the case," said Allis. "They consolidated almost every force they had against Pashad. Maybe they thought they had a better chance of success."

After the opening volleys, the base began taking automatic weapon and rocket-propelled grenade fire from the town itself, which was a first. This was now a 360-degree attack.

For two hours, the rounds kept coming. While directing his men, Arias-Hernandez kept firing enough to feel the brass burn of so many shells being rapidly spent.

The compound would later receive a visit from an Army convoy, but by around 4 a.m., both the convoy and the Special Forces soldiers had to leave, Arias-Hernandez said.

On their way out, the soldiers called Arias-Hernandez and told him their fire was on the mark. The area was littered with dead fighters.

Sporadic fire continued, pushing Arias-Hernandez to exhaustion. In the moments between gun battles, he prayed.

As the sun rose over the desert, the firing ended. Around 8 a.m., villagers passed by the patrol base. They had just returned from a polling station.

"I was still standing at the .50 cal (rifle), and people were passing by, showing me their ink-stained fingers [from voting]," Arias-Hernandez said. "In English, they were saying, 'Thank you, thank you.' It made me think the hell of that last night was worth it."

But battles don't always end neatly. By noon, mortar fire resumed. Arias-Hernandez and his small group withstood six attacks of sporadic fire that day, according to Marine Corps records.

Military officials would later estimate that more than 100 enemy fighters attacked Patrol Base Pashad. Dozens were probably killed, though the bodies had been removed during lulls in the fighting.

Arias-Hernandez and his men didn't suffer a single casualty.

"It made my year to see Staff Sgt. Arias-Hernandez's Bronze Star [with "V"] get approved," Allis said. "The simple fact that everyone survived made it less visible heroism, but the bravery he showed that day absolutely deserved to be recognized."

A few months later, Arias-Hernandez ran into Major Joe again — the man who called Arias-Hernandez crazy for even being at Pashad that night — and got a bear hug.

Looking back, Arias-Hernandez says he was proud to show his Army counterpart what "crazy" Marines could do in a fight.

"I think he got the best impression [of the Marines] he could ever get," he said.

FORT HOOD, TEXAS NOV. 5, 2009

‘There was nowhere to go’

Maj. Steven Richter is almost devoid of emotion as he describes the moment when the red laser sight of the shooter’s semi-automatic pistol settled on him in a Fort Hood parking lot.

An unarmed Richter spotted the beam emanating toward him from the barrel of the gun but kept his eyes on the man at the other end.

“I didn’t have time to look down. But I was lased,” Richter said. “I saw the light directly,”

Already there were dozens of victims. He would be next.

“There was nowhere to go,” Richter said.

But he had put himself in this position. He had accepted the risk. When the shooting broke out inside the medical processing center on Nov. 5, 2009, people fled the scene in panic, trying to find safety somewhere, anywhere.

Richter, who was the chief of operations and deployment medicine, had left that building just five minutes earlier on his daily rounds of the processing center as well as his office next door and another adjacent medical facility.

He was outside the cluster of buildings when the gunfire rang out and grew louder as the cacophony intensified with screaming victims.

Richter made his way through a mass of people running out of the processing center and moved closer to the building.

He helped a young private who had been shot in the shoulder take shelter in a nearby dental office and did the same with a wounded civilian woman who worked for him.

“It wasn’t the smartest damn thing for me to do without being armed. But it was like I was defending an attack on my home,” Richter said. “Those buildings you see on the TV (news coverage of the incident), those were my buildings. Those people worked for me. That was my family.”

After helping the two victims, Richter took cover behind a parked vehicle. The hordes of people who managed to escape were out of sight by then.

“It was like a ghost town,” he said.

Suddenly an injured soldier stumbled from the doors of the processing center. The attacker quickly followed and fired several rounds at the wounded soldier who had fallen to the ground.

That’s when Richter stepped out from behind the vehicle — “to lure [the shooter] out into the open for those who were carrying guns,” he said.

Richter locked eyes with the gunman who then trained the red laser of his 5.7mm handgun on Richter just before civilian police officer Kimberly Munley fired several shots at the shooter, but to no avail.

The distraction gave Richter a chance to regain cover behind a car.

The gunman then fired on Munley before Richter once more stepped out into the open to divert further fire on the downed officer.

Courtesy of the U.S. Army

Maj. Steven Richter, chief of medical logistics for 8th Army, received the Soldier’s Medal for his actions during the 2009 shooting at Fort Hood, Texas.

He again found himself in the crazed man’s cross-hairs before another civilian police officer, Mark Todd, delivered several debilitating shots that stopped the shooter in his tracks, according to eyewitness police reports and military court testimony.

Thirteen people were dead, including a physician’s assistant who worked for Richter. Dozens of others had also been shot.

Fearing there might be more armed attackers because of the high volume of gunfire, Richter rushed to retrieve the shooter’s gun. He cleared the chamber three times, scorching his fingers on the weapon still searing hot from the repeated fire.

Maj. Steven Richter
Soldier’s Medal

He quickly laid it on the ground as people reappeared on the scene. He didn’t want to be mistaken for the shooter.

Richter then ripped off the shooter’s shirt and plugged the gaping bullet wound in the man’s chest with his finger.

That’s when he realized the attacker was a U.S. soldier.

“He’s one of us!” Richter called out, according to his testimony in a pre-trial hearing for Maj. Nidal Hasan in October.

Now paralyzed, Hasan is accused of carrying out the Fort Hood attack after he became convinced that the U.S. military was at war with Islam. Hasan is currently awaiting court-martial in Texas.

“It wasn’t the smartest damn thing for me to do without being armed. But it was like I was defending an attack on my home. Those buildings you see on the TV, those were my buildings. Those people worked for me. That was my family.”

Maj. Steven Richter
On acting as a diversion so civilian police officers could stop a shooter at Fort Hood

Hasan had been an Army psychologist in the processing center Richter oversaw, though the two men had never met, Richter said.

Richter, now the medical logistics chief for 8th Army headquarters in Seoul, South Korea, testified through a video-conference link and expects to be called again as a witness during the impending trial. Richter, a veteran of the first Gulf war and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, said the incident was surreal — a description echoed by many of the witnesses to the massacre.

“I kept thinking it was an exercise,” said Richter, 41, a husband and father of two small children. “That something like this could happen on a U.S. military installation was unfathomable.

“You expect this kind of thing in Iraq and Afghanistan. You never think something like this could happen in America.”

After Hasan went down and Richter realized there was only one shooter, he began helping the wounded and establishing a makeshift triage until victims could be rushed to the hospital.

Richter helped re-establish the deployment processing site at Fort Hood’s gymnasium a few days after the shooting.

The area remained soaked in blood and covered in police tape for weeks after the shooting, he said, and his staff was visibly shaken for months. Richter, though, said he was unfazed by the horrors that played out before him.

“There was no time to stop and feel sorry for myself,” said Richter, who spent much of his childhood on a farm in rural South Dakota. “Things had to get done.”

On Nov. 5, 2010, Richter returned to Fort Hood to receive the Soldier’s Medal, the highest Army commendation for valor in a non-combat situation.

Six other soldiers and one civilian also received Army commendations for their bravery during the Fort Hood shooting.

Like most soldiers, Richter shrugs off the commendation with a “just-doing-my-job” attitude.

“I was raised to dust myself off and get on with things. ... My wife calls me a harsh guy,” Richter said with a chuckle. “I think the way I am helps me deal with these kinds of circumstances.”

By Charlie Reed/Stars and Stripes | reedc@pstripes.osd.mil

AFGHANISTAN

'I feel your hardship and your sacrifice'

Gates takes seriously his chances to thank the troops in person

Courtesy of the U.S. Army

Army Spc. Richard T. Bennett is awarded the Silver Star by Defense Secretary Robert Gates at Forward Operating Base Joyce, Afghanistan, on Dec. 7, 2010. "The opportunity to present someone with a Purple Heart or a Bronze or even a Silver Star is an extraordinary honor for the secretary," said Pentagon press secretary Geoff Morrell.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates should have been tired and grumpy after a long, dusty day in airplanes and helicopters crisscrossing Afghanistan's southern provinces.

But after briefings, photo ops and speeches he stood straight up and smiled proudly to perform the last item on the agenda: pinning valor medals on three soldiers deployed in Kandahar's very dangerous Arghandab district.

On nearly every visit to Afghanistan and Iraq, Gates has stopped to personally pin on a few medals, usually after a quick town hall speech with troops or lunch with some junior servicemembers.

It takes just a few minutes for the citations to be read aloud, the pin, a handshake, a picture and a memory for a lifetime. It may mean more to the white-haired, former Air Force first lieutenant doing the pinning.

"I think that he enjoys it tremendously," said Pentagon press secretary Geoff Morrell, who has traveled at Gates' side everywhere for nearly five years. "The opportunity to present someone with a Purple Heart or a Bronze or even a Silver Star is an extraordinary honor for the secretary. And he comes away from it totally inspired and almost rejuvenated."

He's equally moved any time he has the opportunity to share a moment with warfighters, Morrell said, whether celebrating valor or recognizing the quiet dedication that moved them to volunteer for a job that means risking their lives.

On his March visit, Gates landed at Bagram Air Base hours after arriving in Kabul from Washington. He visited Craig Joint Theater Hospital where, by chance, three soldiers had arrived that morning. Staff Sgt. Steven Dawson, Spc. Gregory Miller and Spc. Quinn Jensen's vehicle hit a roadside bomb; broken limbs were freshly wrapped. Gates pinned Purple Hearts on each of them.

"One minute we were clearing the route, then we were hit, transported here and now Secretary Gates is pinning a Purple Heart on my shirt," Dawson said afterward, his ankle shattered.

Shortly afterward, Gates, in his bomber jacket, hopped on a floodlit stage in a dark, cold warehouse near the flight line to speak to special operations troops. He mentioned the hospital visit and when he spoke about signing their deployment orders and thinking about the safety of each of them, his voice cracked.

It always does.

In Washington, Gates presents himself as a steely eyed assassin of Pentagon bloat, punching back Congress and defense industry giants with billions of dollars at stake. But when it comes to facing the troops, his eyes go misty and his voice softens. The heavy burden of ordering hundreds of thousands of troops to war — some of them to their death — emerges.

Gates flew the next day to meet the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines in Sangin along the Helmand River valley, an area he called the most dangerous in the world.

During its time in Afghanistan, the unit had taken more losses than any other. On this day, the Marines stood in formation in Forward Operating Base Sabit Qadam's rocky courtyard for more than an hour and a half, waiting in the sun for Gates to arrive.

This was also the unit of 1st Lt. Robert Kelly, who was killed in action in December, the son of Gates' newest senior military assistant, Lt. Gen. John Kelly.

"Every day, I monitor how you're doing. And every day you return to your FOB without a loss, I say a little prayer," Gates said, the elder Kelly standing just feet away. "And I say a prayer on the other days as well."

"I'm the one that signed the orders that sent you all here," he said. "I visit your wounded brothers at Bethesda [National Naval Medical Center]. I write the condolence letters to the families of your fallen. And so I feel a tremendous personal sense of responsibility for each and every one of you. And I will, for as long as I'm secretary of defense. I feel your hardship and your sacrifice and those of your families more than you can possibly imagine."

Gates, mindful the men and women have more important things to do than wait for an old Washington bureaucrat, quickly starts the receiving line.

"I don't think it's something he seeks out as much as it is commanders taking advantage of this unique opportunity to honor their troops by having these awards bestowed by the secretary of defense," Morrell said.

"He hopes the troops would remember him as someone who had their back, who was willing to do anything, spend anything, to get them what they need to succeed. ... They provide him with much of his sense of purpose, so when he interacts with them personally, it brings it home in a really acute way."

At the end of the day, after touring an Afghan village, Gates has awards for three members of 2nd "Strike" Brigade, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). He pinned an Army Commendation Medal with "V" on Capt. Jeffrey Mackinnon, who repelled a Taliban attack on his platoon outside Senjaray. Gates pinned another one on Spc. Lorenzo Leon, who "moved under heavy enemy small arms and RPG fire to find and provide aid" to a soldier hit by a roadside bomb outside of Babur, according to his citation.

Spc. Calvin Gilkey assumed control of his squad after their leader was killed, and then led the squad during a Taliban attack on Combat Outpost Stout, July 30 to Aug. 2, 2010, his citation reads, "through four days of near-constant engagement with the enemy."

Gates pinned him with a Bronze Star with "V," posed for a photo and moved on to the next soldier. Still standing at attention, Gilkey's lips released a tiny smile.

By Kevin Baron/Stars and Stripes | baronk@stripes.osd.mil | Twitter: @StripesBaron

MALAJAT, AFGHANISTAN AUG. 30, 2010

'Things could have been a lot worse'

When it was over, when the bomb blast stopped echoing in his ears and the living and dead were accounted for, Pfc. Justin Gleba called his father.

He gave only the basics: His squad had been struck by a bomb buried beneath a road in a dusty village on the outskirts of Kandahar. Two men were killed. Two good men. Gleba assured his father that he was OK.

It was all he could muster.

Who knows, on such days, why death chooses one person over another? Why some are put in its path while others, through fate or chance or dumb luck, walk away unbloodied?

Gleba wasn't ready to share the details, and he wouldn't be for some time.

The hell is in the details, and it all started with a fire.

From the far end of an alley, flames and dark smoke rose from a destroyed truck. Soldiers raised their rifles, peered through the scopes down the length of the alley and concluded that the truck belonged to the Afghan Civil Order Police. It was likely the same vehicle that had been reported stolen earlier in the week.

But the day was winding down and the soldiers were weary from carrying 100-pound rucksacks through 120-degree heat. The decision was made to continue on to their temporary home, an abandoned compound where the soldiers of Operation Southern Comfort — a 10-day campaign to clear the village of Malajat — found fitful sleep during the night.

The next day, Aug. 30, 2010, Gleba's platoon waited until late afternoon to check out the stolen truck. They left the compound at 4:15 p.m. Within minutes, the soldiers started down the alley, in single-file lines, hugging the wall on either side. Gleba, a 20-year-old medic, was on the right side, halfway back.

After some distance, the walls stopped and opened to a clearing. The truck sat in the road. Off to one side, in a field, was a small shed.

As soldiers carefully approached the truck, seeking first to confirm the vehicle identification number, Spc. William Fisher eased over to inspect the shed. Gleba, preparing to keep watch, lowered himself to one knee.

At 4:30 p.m., the explosion.

"There was a bright flash of light, and then everything turned gray," Gleba said. "I saw it just an instant before I heard it, and then the concussion hit me. It was like I got hit in the head with a sledgehammer. It threw me to the ground, and then there was dust everywhere and I heard people screaming."

He realized immediately that soldiers were hurt, perhaps badly, but amid the swirling dirt and debris, he could barely see.

The company's commanding officer was on the radio reporting the explosion. He directed Gleba to the other side of the road. That's where he found his friend.

'He'd always fight for us'

Staff Sgt. Casey Grochowiak didn't have to be in Afghanistan. At 34, married with two kids, he'd done two tours in Afghanistan and one in Iraq. Years earlier, he'd hurt his back parachuting out of an airplane, an injury that required multiple surgeries and would have easily allowed him to keep a stateside assignment.

"He always told me that he would wake up feeling like the tin man that got left out in the rain," Gleba said. "And not only could he have chosen not to go, but he actually had to try very hard to get medical clearance to go. He was very determined to come here."

A Ranger-tabbed noncommissioned officer, Grochowiak had spent time instructing young soldiers and believed deeply that, injuries aside, his experience and expertise were best put to use alongside those young soldiers in combat.

It might just keep one of them alive.

He befriended Gleba soon after the junior soldier joined the unit, fresh out of combat medic school at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, and just before they deployed to Afghanistan in early August.

Grochowiak told Gleba stories about past deployments and covert missions. He also talked often about the dog he planned to get his family upon returning home and the rifle he would buy for his son so they could go shooting together.

"He always liked me, too," Gleba said. "I was the doc. He'd always say, 'No one messes with my doc while I'm around.'

"He was kind of a badass. Not only that, he was a good NCO. He looked out for us. When we got ridiculous orders to do something stupid, he'd always fight for us."

Gleba found Grochowiak just outside the crater dug into the earth by the force of the bomb. Grochowiak's legs were severed, and most of his right arm. He was conscious, barely, but quickly sliding into shock. Nothing could be done to save him.

At medic school, soldiers are taught to expect this moment, be ready for it, don't dwell on it. In his head, Gleba remembered all this. In his heart, it's not so easy.

He injected his friend with morphine, easing his passing.

'Pieces that went with the dead'

A rustling in the woods jarred Gleba back into the moment, and he realized that he and his men might not be alone. The bomb could have been triggered by a hidden Taliban fighter. For all he knew, there could be dozens of Taliban watching them.

He rose from his knees, where he'd tended to Grochowiak, and along with Sgt. Richard Cardenas took a step toward the tree line. They considered spraying bullets into the trees — "recon by fire" — and moving forward to investigate. For reasons Gleba cannot recall, they opted against it.

Pfc. Justin Gleba
Bronze Star with "V"

Nearby was the body of the platoon leader. First Lt. Mark Noziska had been killed instantly.

Noziska, 24, had joined the National Guard after high school and gone active duty after graduating from the University of Nebraska at Omaha with a criminal justice degree. Friends and family told newspapers after his death that he'd been moved to join the military by the Sept. 11 attacks. He was only a sophomore in high school then, but he vowed to serve his country. He was, they said, a patriot.

"I didn't get to know him as well," Gleba said. "But he was the same as Staff Sergeant Grochowiak. He'd always fight for us. He cared about us. … Those were two of our best guys."

The most seriously wounded were Pfc. Adam Moreau, who was just 10 feet away when the bomb detonated, and an Afghan interpreter. With the area around the crater still unsecured, Gleba instructed other soldiers to take the wounded back to the alley's entrance, where he could treat them in relative safety.

Moreau suffered a concussion and a ruptured eardrum. Shrapnel pierced his face, neck and arm. The interpreter absorbed shrapnel in his side. Gleba cleaned up both of them and saw them loaded onto an Afghan police vehicle that delivered them to a medevac helicopter for a lift to Kandahar Airfield.

A second vehicle arrived to carry away the bodies of Grochowiak and Noziska, destined to travel the same route. This time, there was no sense of urgency.

Calmly, Gleba walked back down the alley to retrieve "the pieces that went with the dead."

'We'll never know'

Operation Southern Comfort ended early, the soldiers carrying it out shaken by the sudden violence.

For his level-headed response in caring for his soldiers during moments of death and chaos, Gleba received a Bronze Star with "V." Those questions of life, death and luck remain unanswered.

Grochowiak and Noziska died Aug. 30. For the rest of the squad's soldiers, despite their losses, it was one of the most fortunate days of their lives.

An explosive ordnance disposal team sent to the site later found five more pressure-plate bombs buried in the immediate vicinity of the stolen Afghan police truck. That no one else stepped on a plate during the entire frantic ordeal, Gleba said, is nothing short of amazing.

As he treated Grochowiak during his final moments, a bomb waited about three feet away. Had Gleba and Cardenas chosen to further investigate the rustling in the trees, one of them surely would have stepped on it.

Fisher, who was on his way to inspect the nearby shed when the blast went off, might be the luckiest of all. The EOD team discovered that the shed doors were rigged to detonate a dozen 155mm Russian artillery shells.

"With our proximity to that shed, I wouldn't be surprised if that killed half of the squad, myself included," said Gleba, who along with Moreau recently was promoted to specialist.

At that discovery, the EOD team deemed it too dangerous to continue and called in an airstrike. Six 500-pound bombs finished the clearing job.

"Things could have been a lot worse that day," Gleba said. "There could have been more there, but we'll never know. And I don't want to know."

By Derek Turner/Stars and Stripes | turnerd@stripes.osd.mil | Twitter: @DerekTurnerDC

FOB NAWBAHAR, AFGHANISTAN NOV. 7, 2009

Courtesy of Kyle Maki

Then-1st Lt. Kyle Maki poses before the first flight of his Afghanistan deployment in April 2009. In November, Maki, Capt. Matthew Clawson and Chief Warrant Officers 4 Alexander Brigman Jr. and Keith Matz flew a routine mission that turned into much more.

'We were there for those kids'

It had the makings of a classic ambush, with the enemy poised on a remote ridgeline in Afghanistan waiting for the Americans to enter the narrow valley below. But the two Apache helicopters that roared to the rescue squelched the scheming insurgents with a barrage of gunfire.

Four U.S. Army pilots were thrust into a battle for their lives and for the U.S. and Afghan soldiers they were protecting on the ground against a heavily armed group of Taliban on motorcycles and in trucks equipped with weapons to knock aircraft from the sky.

Capt. Matthew Clawson
Capt. Kyle Maki
Chief Warrant Officer 4 Alexander Brigman Jr.
Chief Warrant Officer 4 Keith Matz
Distinguished Flying Cross

It was Nov. 7, 2009, a day that began as a routine mission for Capts. Kyle Maki and Matthew Clawson, and Chief Warrant Officers 4 Alexander Brigman Jr. and Keith Matz. While searching for enemy fighters setting up roadside bombs, they were called to Forward Operating Base Nawbahar, a remote outpost in eastern Zabul province.

Their new tasking turned into an hour-long firefight in which they spent all their ammunition while dodging anti-aircraft guns. The final tally: 18 confirmed dead insurgents; zero injured U.S. or Afghan troops. Zero bullet holes in the Apaches and numerous enemy spoils of war.

For their action, deemed "above and beyond the call of duty," each of the four received the Distinguished Flying Cross, America's oldest military aviation award, created by Congress more than 80 years ago.

"My biggest thing is we were there for those kids on the ground," said Matz, 38, of Slippery Rock, Pa.

The outcome might have been different if not for the Apaches, given the terrain and the overwhelming firepower the Taliban brought to the fight, the pilots say.

The small company of Afghan National Army soldiers and their U.S. trainers from the 82nd Airborne Division called for air cover when their tiny mud-brick base began receiving mortar fire.

"En route, we got in contact with them and they said they were still getting mortared," said Brigman, 46, of Pace, Fla. "It didn't make sense. Usually the bad guys drop a few mortars and leave. That's when Capt. Maki said, 'That sounds like an ambush to me.'"

When the Apaches arrived, the ground troops were headed in the direction from which they thought the mortars were coming. The Apaches flew a big circle around them, scanning the area for anything unusual.

The soldiers called the pilots again, this time saying, "We're hearing heavy machine gun fire and it's not being directed at us."

"At that moment, we realized we were being shot at," Brigman said. "We just didn't know from where. I told everyone to keep their head on a swivel."

That's when Maki, the co-pilot and gunner of the lead Apache with Brigman, saw a truck with an anti-aircraft gun aimed at his aircraft.

"We saw the flashes coming from the barrel," he said.

Maki fired the Apache's 30 mm cannon, destroying the truck and gun. Matz and Clawson — Maki's and Brigman's wingmen in the trailing Apache — radioed about another truck with an anti-aircraft gun also pointed at their helicopter.

"My aircraft rolls back in [and] we destroy the second truck with a Hellfire missile," Maki said.

In total, there were four trucks spread across the ridgeline about 200 meters apart firing with heavy anti-aircraft artillery, Matz said.

That wasn't all.

Maki, 26, of Memphis, Tenn., and Brigman flew in closer and got their first glimpse of what they were up against.

"It looks like we kicked up an ant hill," Brigman said. "There were foreign fighters everywhere."

Many of them moved about on motorcycles, hidden deep in the shadows of a ravine.

Maki estimated at least 30 enemy fighters and 20 motorcycles.

Both Apaches took turns diving and firing.

"He would roll in first," Matz said of Brigman. "He would say 'Outbound,' and I'd roll in. What you want to do is a constant barrage of fire on them."

Maki fired 300 rounds of the 30mm cannon, which explode on impact like a grenade, two Hellfire missiles, which spray shrapnel upon detonation, and rockets.

The helicopters eventually left to refuel and rearm, flying through a sandstorm, before returning to continue providing air cover until sundown. The ground forces recovered four trucks — including two stolen from the Afghan National Army — 17 motorcycles, one recoilless rifle with five rounds of ammunition, seven rocket-propelled grenades, 17 AK-47s, roadside bomb-making components, a video recorder and multiple intelligence documents, Maki said.

It was a deliberate, planned attack by the Taliban to train young fighters how to properly engage aircraft and ground forces, Maki said.

"They were waiting for the U.S. and [Afghan National Army] forces to come through that [ravine]," Brigman said. "It would have just been a turkey shoot."

By Jennifer H. Svan/Stars and Stripes | svanj@estripes.osd.mil

ARGHANDAB, AFGHANISTAN

July 30-Aug. 2, 2010

Megan McCloskey/Stars and Stripes

Sgt. 1st Class Kyle Lyon shows Gen. David Petraeus in December where fighting occured in the four-day battle during which Lyon earned the Silver Star. Petraeus pinned the medal on Lyon during a brief ceremony in the Arghandab River Valley outside the combat outpost that was set up as result of the battle.

'It was a really big fight'

The artillery weatherman, on the ground for his fourth deployment, asked to become an infantryman, but the Army turned him down.

Then his exploits as a platoon leader during a four-day battle in the Arghandab River Valley earned him the Silver Star.

As Sgt. 1st Class Kyle Lyon stood on the bridge where the bulk of the fighting went down, the top commander in Afghanistan pinned on his medal and said he'd heard Lyon wanted to be an 11 Bravo, the classification for enlisted infantry.

"Why don't you give this another shot," Gen. David Petraeus said, "with my signature on it this time."

When Lyon joined the Army 10 years ago, he asked to drive a tank, but the recruiter offered paratroopers instead. Lyon thought that sounded good.

"I'm thinking WWII on D-Day, what I saw watching The History Channel," Lyon said.

But paratrooper units are much more than just soldiers jumping from planes and Lyon ended up as a weatherman, tracking conditions to determine how they will affect artillery.

During one of his three deployments to Iraq, he served as a provisional infantryman, and he got the chance again to live the infantry life again during a deployment to Afghanistan with 1st Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment, 101st Airborne Division, which had been tasked as infantry as part of the surge into Kandahar.

"As much as I love my real job, if I could keep doing the infantry thing I would be stoked," Lyon said.

Sgt. 1st Class Kyle Lyon
Silver Star

His battalion commander and sergeant major encouraged him to try to reclassify not long after they arrived in Kandahar. The Army, however, declined his application because it didn't need any more infantrymen at his rank.

So when Petraeus visited in December to tour a village in Arghandab and pin commendation medals on 1-320th soldiers, their commander, Lt. Col. David Flynn, immediately went into a full-court press for Lyon.

Petraeus was sold.

"I have a lot more fun doing this," Lyon said about infantry.

At the end of July, much of the lush territory was defined by the canals, with insurgents dominating the land south of the second canal. Lyon's company was charged with seizing an area of the pomegranate orchard past that canal where troops had only gone a few times.

The soldiers blew up a few roadside bombs on the main stretch of road, and then almost immediately they started taking coordinated, accurate fire — "getting us into a pretty good gunfight," Lyon said.

He ran from cover through enemy fire to reposition a grenade launcher so it could be used to mark enemy positions for airstrikes. Lyon spent the day coordinating his platoon's fire to fend off the insurgents, who used walls for cover as they tried to move into the buildings that were "a little too close for comfort to us," he said.

The fight, in pomegranate and grape fields surrounding a few mud buildings, died down as night fell.

"They'd wait until dawn," Lyon said. "Everything happened under light."

Over the course of the next few days, the battle maintained that rhythm.

"It would shut down at night for a little while, we'd get some sleep and then go back to it in the morning," Lyon said.

On the second day, the enemy lobbed grenades at Lyon's men. The Americans couldn't determine where the fire was coming from, and frustration mounted as they took casualties. The captain asked if anyone could do crater analysis. Lyon volunteered and ran out into the fire to study the points of impact, hoping to determine where the enemy's weapon was located.

"Probably wasn't the smartest thing I've ever done," Lyon said.

On the third day, Lyon's mission was to provide security while an explosive ordinance disposal unit cleared the buildings that had been rigged to blow. Lyon's platoon started taking small-arms fire from 50 meters away.

Lyon charged toward the fire to a position with no cover and took out the enemy. On the fourth and final day, Lyon coordinated multiple accurate air strikes with Apaches and A-10s.

The fierceness of the battle convinced the Army this was significant territory. They decided to stay and set up a combat outpost.

Petraeus remarked that historians would mark the battle as an important step for success of the surge, saying "extraordinary courage was ordinary" those days.

As for Lyon, the soon-to-be 11 Bravo, he describes it like this: "It was really a big fight. We were running around shooting and having a good time."

By Megan McCloskey/Stars and Stripes | mccloskeym@stripes.osd.mil | Twitter: @MegMcCloskey

BAGHDAD, IRAQ 2010

'It was the single best thing that I did the year I was there'

As Army Lt. Col. Vincent Barnhart gazes at photos of children taken during his 2010 deployment to Iraq, his eyes moisten as he fights back his emotions.

The tears are borne of happiness, though, and the names he remembers bring a smile. The stories he tells about the kids all have a happy ending. This is not your typical war story.

For those who know him, it's obvious that Barnhart, the 1st Armored Division surgeon, has a soft spot for children. He has six of his own, four of them adopted. So when he heard about a program to help disabled Iraqi children, he was eager to pitch in.

Barnhart spearheaded the division's involvement in the nonprofit Wheelchairs for Iraqi Kids project, which has distributed about 1,000 pediatric wheelchairs to Iraqi children with permanent disabilities since 2005. The project relies exclusively on individual and corporate donations.

Barnhart shows a photo of a grinning Iraqi boy, sitting in his first set of wheels.

"This guy I really liked. He was a sweetheart."

He flips to the next one.

"This little girl that's lying in her bed and can't bend anymore, if she'd had this earlier she probably would not be in such a circumstance."

During three events in Baghdad last year, Barnhart and his team of medics assembled and distributed 100 state-of-the-art, fully adjustable wheelchairs.

"It was the single best thing that I did the year I was there," Barnhart said.

Around 95 percent of kids who come for the free wheelchairs suffer from birth defects or childhood illnesses, such as cerebral palsy, spina bifida, polio and even debilitating adverse vaccine reactions. Some were victims of roadside bombs or suicide bombers.

Most of the kids can't walk and they spend their lives confined to a floor in a back room, too much a burden for the family to take on a trip to the market. Sometimes the overwhelmed parents will drop them off at orphanages.

"There's a stigma associated with disability and they just don't have the resources," said Barnhart.

The story of how the program got started is an unlikely one, but it ends with the hundreds of Iraqi children enjoying some mobility for the first time in their lives.

Wheelchairs for Iraqi Kids founder and director Brad Blauser came to Iraq as a last resort after a post-Sept. 11 career meltdown. He was on the verge of bankruptcy, but landed a job with defense contractor KBR.

MARK PATTON/Stars and Stripes

Army Lt. Col. Vincent Barnhart looks at photos of children taken during his 2010 deployment to Iraq. Barnhart was instrumental in helping with the charity Wheelchairs for Iraqi Kids.

Courtesy of Brad Blauser

Lt. Col. Vincent Barnhart, the 1st Armored Division surgeon, poses with an Iraqi child in Baghdad. Barnhart spearheaded a division effort to distribute 100 wheelchairs to disabled Iraqi children during three 2010 events. Brad Blauser, founder and director of Wheelchairs for Iraqi Kids, has been working with the military since 2005 and has delivered about 1,000 wheelchairs to Iraqi children with disabilities.

It was there that Blauser met Maj. David Brown, now a lieutenant colonel, who told him about disabled children in Mosul who were pulling themselves through the streets and didn't have access to a wheelchair.

Within six months Blauser set up a website, received $22,000 in donations and formed a partnership with a Bozeman, Mont., nonprofit group — dubbed Reach Out and Care Wheels — that uses a highly adjustable pediatric wheelchair made by South Dakota prison inmates.

Blauser never looked back despite multiple setbacks, including his KBR supervisor frowning on the extra work he was doing on the side.

That's when Gen. David Petraeus saw a story that aired on CNN's "Heroes: An All-Star Tribute." Petraeus was enamored with the project and offered Blauser a place to stay at the Victory Base Complex in Baghdad where he could coordinate his efforts.

"So many doors have been opened for me at critical junctures," Blauser said, crediting Petraeus for helping him stay in Iraq to continue his charity.

Although 1,000 wheelchairs may seem like an enormous number, it's only scratching the surface of what is needed.

A 2007 UNICEF report said that one in seven Iraqi children has at least one disability and Barnhart estimated that 150,000 kids in Iraq are in need of some sort of mobility device.

Maj. Richard Floyd with the 1st AD surgeon's office said every kid they helped matters, even if they couldn't provide wheelchairs for them all.

"Specifically for these Iraqi families, it means everything," Floyd said.

SEE BARNHART ON PAGE 35

By Mark Patton/Stars and Stripes | pattonm@estripes.osd.mil

COMBAT OUTPOST KEATING, AFGHANISTAN OCT. 3, 2009

‘It ended up being a pretty long day’

Apache helicopter pilot Capt. Matthew Kaplan had been up to this particular valley many times and knew the scene well. But when his two-apache team arrived early one October morning in 2009 to respond to an attack on a combat outpost, he said, every building except one was burning, blanketing the entire area in smoke. “The whole valley was covered,” Kaplan said. “It made it almost impossible to see anything.”

Within minutes, the other Apache was hit and had to retreat. A second team of two helicopters went in, immediately took fire, and also had to pull back, leaving men on the ground under fire. Another apache already had been hit before Kaplan’s team arrived.

“As soon as we showed up, we knew it was a bad situation,” he said.

One of the Taliban’s most notorious and well-planned ambushes against U.S. forces during the Afghanistan War had begun. The reverberations from it would be felt for some time. In the months following the Taliban’s attack on Combat Outpost Keating, an Army investigation found that because the base was one of several in the region set to be closed, it was improperly ignored — two officers received administrative punishments — and the enemy exploited it. After the fight on Oct. 3, 2009, Keating was evacuated, abandoned, and later intentionally destroyed by aircraft.

In the five preceding months to the assault it had been attacked 47 times, including probing hits to see how the Americans would respond.

As many as 500 Taliban fighters attacked the 60 Americans at Keating on Oct. 3. They’d also set up three positions to attack support aircraft coming to the fight through the usual valley pass. Within hours, they’d disabled three helicopters and fighters breached the outpost’s perimeter walls. By the end of the day, eight Americans were dead, 24 wounded.

For Kaplan, there were other days, other firefights, even hairier situations that year. But none matched the duration of this fight or ammunition expended.

Kaplan had been in country with the 7th Squadron, 17th Cavalry Regiment, 159th Combat Aviation Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, since December 2008. They inserted air assault troops, covered troop movements and heavy-lift Chinooks resupplying troops in some of the more dangerous valleys. They launched quick-reaction teams to support troops under attack.

“We were pretty busy,” Kaplan said. “I had flown quite a bit by that point.”

Kaplan was asleep when the ambush began, right at the end of the night shift. But he was acting company commander, and so was awakened to relieve the initial team.

Combat Outpost Keating was overrun. A Black Hawk was sent in to retrieve some of the men pinned down. Two Apaches must go with it to provide cover.

Kaplan scrambled to the helicopters within 10 minutes, taking the front seat, which controls missiles and guns and does most of the shooting. By the time he arrived, an hour away, one of the Apaches on scene already had taken fire from DShK (pronounced DISH-kah) Soviet-era anti-aircraft guns.

Capt. Matthew Kaplan
Distinguished Flying Cross

“Pretty severe damage,” Kaplan said.

The Apache pulled back to make an emergency landing at Forward Operating Base Bostick.

When Kaplan’s team arrived, they’d left their Black Hawk hovering atop the mountain to relay what was happening below. Kaplan’s pair of Apaches went in and immediate his wingman was hit by DShK fire. They could not leave just one helicopter, so they both pulled back to Bostick to regroup.

As they landed, a backup pair of Apaches arrived above Keating and almost immediately took heavy fire. They, too, had to retreat to Bostick.

Two and a half hours had passed since Americans inside Keating first called for help. After some regrouping and repair work, Apaches and Black Hawks were back in the air, this time with a new plan: Insert 150 air assault troops to join the fight.

It took five return passes to insert all the reinforcements. With everyone taking heavy machine gun fire, Kaplan fired on two Taliban teams launching rocket-propelled grenades.

He’d flown nearly eight hours, by then. When they were done, they returned to Jalalabad to brief the next crews heading in.

But Kaplan didn’t quit. They needed an aviation officer to liaison with the ground. He volunteered to go back up, packed a quick bag, hopped on a Black Hawk for the rest of the night’s air assault, inserting special operations forces.

“It ended up being a pretty long day,” Kaplan said.

Later, back at Bostick, he pitched in and helped move casualties off aircraft arriving from Keating. Everyone, including Kaplan, was giving blood.

“Not a fun part of it, for sure,” Kaplan said. “I really don’t know how to put it into words.”

For that day, Kaplan received the Distinguished Flying Cross.

“The actual fight, seeing the COP on fire, hearing guys on the radio,” he said, “nothing prepares you for that.” Kaplan pauses, unsure what else to tell.

Kaplan, originally from Ohio, was a freshman at The Citadel, South Carolina’s military college when 9/11 happened. Today, he is in training at Fort Campbell to be a special operations pilot. He likely will deploy to Afghanistan again sometime this fall.

Chief Warrant Officer 2 Gary Wingert, Kaplan’s co-pilot, along with the crews of the three Apaches, Chief Warrant Officer 3 Ross Lewallen, Chief Warrant Officer 3 Randy Huff, Chief Warrant Officer 2 Chad Bardwell, and Chief Warrant Officer 2 Chris Wright, also received a Distinguished Flying Cross.

By Kevin Baron/Stars and Stripes | baronk@stripes.osd.mil | Twitter: @StripesBaron

Barnhart: ‘It made a difference to those kids’

FROM PAGE 34

Blauser said tribal and family marriages and improper birthing methods contribute to the large numbers of infants born with defects.

“What [Iraq’s] Ministry of Health is prepared to provide is very minimal,” said Barnhart. “The Iraqi health care system has reached the tipping point. They’re able to provide basic primary care to the citizens of Iraq, but this is so far from basic primary care.”

Barnhart said many of the Iraqi families he met were surprised at the American generosity, because for many all they hear are reports about U.S. troops killing their people.

“You’re sowing seeds that over a generation — it’s not going to be instant — are going to fit into the kind of relationship we hope to have over there,” Barnhart said.

Blauser said many of the children “flip out” when they see their wheelchairs because to them it’s just like the bicycle they see other kids riding around on.

It’s not only the kid and their families that benefit, though. Blauser said many times he sees soldiers standing outside trying to regain their composure before going back in to help teach the families how to adjust the wheelchair.

“Some of the troops, they’ve had to do some stuff that’s going to haunt them the rest of their lives,” Blauser said. “This gives them something good to remember.”

Blauser said he hopes to continue the program even as the American presence in Iraq continues to draw down. He also aims to raise money for a factory in the Baghdad area so they can procure the equipment and make the wheelchairs locally.

Afghanistan is in his sights, but so far he has no offers of support there.

Blauser envisions bringing local disabled people from Kabul onto base to assemble wheelchair components, so wheelchairs would be locally available for military units, Provincial Reconstruction Teams and other organizations operating in Afghanistan.

While Wheelchairs for Iraqi Kids continues its mission in Iraq, Blauser hasn’t forgotten Barnhart, even though the 1st AD officer is back in Germany.

“He committed to me right away,” Blauser said. “I need more like him.”

Barnhart closes his picture album, but it’s evident the pictures and memories are etched into his mind.

“Is what we’re doing really making a difference?” he said. “I don’t know, but it made a difference to those kids.”

Those wishing to donate to Wheelchairs for Iraqi Kids can do so at www.WheelchairsForIraqiKids.com via PayPal, or they can mail a check to the address listed on the site.

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– THE MEDAL OF HONOR – 150 YEARS OF COURAGE AND SACRIFICE

"For gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of one's life above and beyond the call of duty while engaged in military operations against an enemy of the United States"

The Medal of Honor was established in 1861 by an Act of Congress signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln who once said, "Any nation that does not honor its heroes will not long endure." Now, 150 years later, as we celebrate this prestigious Medal's sesquicentennial anniversary, it stands at the pinnacle of a "pyramid of honor" representing the highest award for valor in combat that can be bestowed upon a member of the armed forces of the United States.

The Medal's rich history can be divided into three eras. The first begins in the early days of the Civil War when Congress passed a law establishing a Medal of Honor for the Navy. A second Congressional Act soon followed, creating a Medal of Honor for the Army. Nearly twenty-five hundred Medals were eventually awarded for action during the Civil War, mostly to soldiers in the Union Army. Unfortunately, there were no detailed criteria or time limits for applying for the award, and many went to individuals who did nothing heroic whatsoever—for example, more than 900 members of the 27th Maine Volunteer Infantry received the Medal as an inducement to remain on active duty during a critical period of the war.

Over time, the criteria became more stringent and in 1876 a board of officers reviewing a large number of recommendations for the Medal of Honor from the battle of the Little Big Horn used the criterion that the action for which the recommendation is being made should be deeds beyond the simple discharge of duty that if omitted or refused to be done would not subject the person to censure as a shortcoming or failure. Later, with more than 700 Civil War soldiers having applied for the Medal just since 1890, more than twenty-five years after the conflict, President William McKinley directed the Army to establish new procedures.

In 1916, a panel of five generals was established to review all 2,625 Medals presented by the Army up to that time. The result was that 911 Medals, most awarded during the Civil War, were revoked, including the only Medal awarded to a woman, a civilian contract surgeon named Mary Walker, who had tended to the sick and wounded during several major battles and been held as a prisoner of war for several months. Many years later, her Medal was restored.

By establishing tougher criteria, the panel realized that it had created another problem—how to recognize the heroism and outstanding performance of military personnel who performed at levels somewhat below those that would justify receiving the Medal of Honor. In 1918, several other medals were established by Congress and the "pyramid of honor" was born.

The second era in the Medal of Honor story, from 1918 to 1963, demanded very high standards, yet still permitted Medals of Honor for distinguished acts not involving combat. Charles Lindbergh and Admiral Richard Byrd received their Medals during this time, as did four Navy men who risked their lives to save the crew of the sunken American submarine USS Squalus in 1939.

The third era, which continues to the present day, was marked by an act of Congress passed in 1963 establishing that all future Medals of Honor be awarded only for heroic action in combat. By this Act, Congress standardized the basic criteria used by each of the services to recommend the award of the Medal.

Since the end of the Vietnam War, although the United States has been involved in a great deal of combat activity, only ten Medals have been approved, all but one posthumously. The first two were awarded to Army sergeants Gary Gordon and Randall Shughart (Somalia). The third through tenth were awarded for actions in Iraq and Afghanistan: posthumously to Army Sergeant 1st Class Paul Smith (Iraq); to Marine Corporal Jason Dunham (Iraq); to Navy SEAL Lieutenant Michael Murphy (Afghanistan); to Navy SEAL, Master-at-Arms 2nd Class Michael Monsoor (Iraq); to Army Private First Class Ross McGinnis (Iraq); to Army Staff Sergeant Jared Monti (Afghanistan); and to Army Staff Sergeant Robert Miller (Afghanistan). The last Medal of Honor awarded was to Army Staff Sergeant Salvatore Giunta (Afghanistan); he was the first living recipient of the Medal during an ongoing conflict since the Vietnam War. Underscoring the level of bravery and risk to one's life exhibited since the beginning of World War II, more than 60 percent of the more than 850 Medals awarded have been awarded posthumously.

The total number of Medals awarded number fewer than 3,500. By service branch, they are as follows: Army, 2,365; Army Air Corps, 43; Navy, 746; Marine Corps, 297; Air Force, 18; Coast Guard, 1; and Unknowns, 9. The total number of recipients is 3,454, although 3,473 Medals have been awarded. Nineteen of these were second Medals (Army, 4; Navy, 8; Marine Corps, 7). There are presently fewer than 85 Medal of Honor recipients still living, all of whom, without exception, earned the award through extraordinary heroism in combat.

This year marks a notable milestone in the history of a very special Medal that embodies the courage and sacrifices of millions of Americans who have served and fought for this great country through the ages to defend our freedoms. To a man, those who wear the pale blue ribbon with Medal of Honor around their neck will tell you they wear it for those who can't, for those who were never recognized for their heroism and for those who made the ultimate sacrifice and never came home.

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