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AIRMEN IN THE FIGHT



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PORTRAITS

IN COURAGE


VOL III

THE CHIEF OF STAFF'S PORTRAITS IN COURAGE

With tremendous pride, I present the third volume of The Chief of Staff's Portraits in Courage. These stories highlight the bravery, commitment, teamwork and personal sacrifice of America's Airmen.

The sixteen Airmen featured in these pages demonstrated valor, conviction and steadfastness as they accomplished their mission. Whether calling in air strikes, manning a .50 caliber machine gun, or defending a logistics staging area these Airmen contributed bravely and represented the best characteristics of our service. I am humbled to know we all serve with such selfless heroes. They serve as an example to us all and, like you, can take pride in making the world a safer place to live.

These vignettes are a small sampling of the courage and fortitude exhibited by Airmen on the battlefield everyday. As your Chief and fellow Airman, it is my honor to personally thank you for all you do. You and your families are the pride of this Nation and I salute you!



NORTON A. SCHWARTZ
General, USAF
Chief of Staff

THE AIRMAN'S CREED

I am an American Airman.
I am a Warrior.
I have answered my Nation's call.

I am an American Airman.
My mission is to Fly, Fight, and Win.
I am faithful to a Proud Heritage,
A Tradition of Honor,
a Legacy of Valor.

I am an American Airman.
Guardian of Freedom and Justice,
My Nation's Sword and Shield,
Its Sentry and Avenger.
I defend my Country with my Life.

I am an American Airman.
Wingman, Leader, Warrior.
I will never leave an Airman behind,
I will never falter,
and I will not fail.



TSgt Vilma CANTU COMBAT CAMERA

Technical Sergeant Vilma Cantu led a two-person combat camera team for more than six months in Iraq. She supported 34 ground combat missions, eight air assault raids, and a total of nearly 600 hours acquiring video intelligence and documentary video for Multi-National Corps Iraq.

While patrolling one day with a Stryker brigade and a concerned local citizens group, Sergeant Cantu and her team were caught in a complex ambush along the Tigris River. Throughout the three-hour firefight, she continued to film with her video camera while returning fire with her M-4 carbine and sidearm.

Although the fire she provided helped subdue the enemy and capture three terrorists, the imagery she captured of the entire battle was just as valuable to the brigade and division commanders. Sergeant Cantu's ability to rapidly assess the situation allowed her to shift between filming and shooting as necessary, and ensured accomplishment of her mission as a combat photographer and fulfillment of her duties as an American Airman and warrior.

Sergeant Cantu's motivation through this fight and several other combat situations was very simple: document the selfless actions of her fellow warriors. As she put it, "I was just doing my job by documenting our many brave service members in action." In her case, one of these brave service members was actually behind the camera.

Special Agent Jac CHRISTIANSEN, OSI



Special Agent Jac Christiansen served as the lead investigator on 158 Counter-Improvised Explosive Device (IED) missions. His efforts have proved vital to commanders' efforts to mitigate IED threats and provide better force protection for their personnel.

On April 20, 2007, while returning from a mission in Fallujah, Iraq, his vehicle struck an IED. The driver was hit by shrapnel in the legs, the gunner was knocked unconscious, and Agent Christiansen suffered a concussion. Despite his injuries and the continuous enemy attack, he provided first aid to the injured until he and his team were evacuated. Without regard for his injuries, he continued to take missions every day to identify, neutralize and destroy IEDs and weapons caches throughout the Anbar Province.

On July 26, 2007, his armored vehicle was hit again and severely damaged by a very large "high-yield" IED. Agent Christiansen was briefly knocked unconscious. Upon regaining consciousness, he first thought of his fellow Airmen; "I just wanted to know and make sure the rest of the team was okay."

Despite injuries from five separate IED attacks during his time in Iraq, Agent Christiansen's work ultimately led to the identification of 20 insurgents building IEDs intended to target Coalition forces. Agent Christiansen was awarded the Bronze Star, Purple Heart and Combat Action Medal.





Special Agent James COLLINS, OSI

Special Agent James Collins was in Haditha, Iraq, on December 3, 2006, when he witnessed a Marine CH-46 Sea Knight crash into Lake Quadisiya as it attempted a liftoff from a helipad. The helicopter pitched forward and plunged into the frigid water 40 feet below. Passengers and crew jumped into the rough water of the lake, but they were weighed down heavily with body armor, weapons and combat gear.

Agent Collins raced to the scene, swam out 130 feet into the lake, and found two Marines who had bailed out of the downed helicopter. Pulling the heavily-equipped Marines through the water to safety was no easy task. He swam the survivors back to shore where other personnel began to pull the survivors of the crash out of the lake, get them warm and dry, and render medical aid.

Without hesitation, Agent Collins returned to the water. Swimming again toward the crash site he found another survivor and pulled him to safety. Agent Collins then went out a final time to rescue one of the helicopter's crewmembers.

Agent Collins was in the lake for more than 25 minutes, and he could feel the frigid water taking a toll on his body and muscle control. Ignoring his own pain and discomfort, he selflessly rejoined the rescuers onshore and continued the on shore rescue effort.

SSgt Dean CONNER

COMBAT CONTROL



Staff Sergeant Dean Conner is a Combat Controller and Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC), an expert at the direction and control of close air support (CAS). In October 2007, Sergeant Conner was attached to one of several Special Forces teams operating in a volatile region of Afghanistan.

Sergeant Conner's team was conducting a routine vehicle patrol when his convoy was ambushed. A rocket-propelled grenade struck his vehicle and knocked him temporarily unconscious. After he recovered, he returned fire with his M-240 machine gun, regained the advantage, and prevented the convoy from being flanked. He also promptly requested CAS to allow the remaining vehicles to clear the zone.

Ten days later, Sergeant Conner was once again performing JTAC duties when his Special Forces team came under heavy fire. Sergeant Conner immediately coordinated with the ground force commander and requested CAS. He directed a flight of F-15Es onto their first target. As the F-15Es were engaging the first target, Conner was hit in the abdomen by enemy gunfire. In spite of his wounds, and refusing any pain medication that could affect his mental acuity, he coordinated with the flight lead to press their attacks on enemy combatants and protect his team. He continued coordinating CAS missions for 45 minutes until his team was safe and he was able to call for his own medical evacuation airlift.

For his gallant actions and devotion to duty, Sergeant Conner was awarded the Bronze Star Medal with Valor and the Purple Heart.





TSgt John DEMASO TACP

Technical Sergeant John DeMaso epitomizes the warrior Airman. Then-Staff Sergeant DeMaso deployed as the Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC) for an Army Special Forces team operating in the vicinity of Suwayrah, Iraq.

During combat action in February 2007, Sergeant DeMaso participated in a raid to clear a local village of anti-Iraqi forces. As the Special Forces team advanced, the enemy opened fire from multiple positions with heavy machine guns, small arms, sniper and mortar fire. Sergeant DeMaso, in spite of his exposure to direct enemy fire, climbed onto a hilltop in order to effectively manage inbound close air support (CAS) aircraft. DeMaso spotted, engaged and eliminated an enemy sniper position with his M-4 rifle while coordinating CAS strikes to allow the Soldiers to regroup. He then called for additional strikes, destroying an enemy resupply truck, eliminating several enemy positions, and killing numerous insurgents.

DeMaso's further coordination with two F-16 pilots resulted in the destruction of an enemy mortar position and two safehouses, thwarting an enemy attempt to rally and counterattack. Covering the safe departure of Coalition forces, he then coordinated for three additional strafing runs from two A-10 aircraft. These strafing runs eliminated the enemy massed along the opposite side of the Tigris River in preparation for a counterattack.

Sergeant DeMaso's heroics that day resulted in no losses to Coalition forces.

MSgt Randy GILLESPIE

LOGISTICS

Master Sergeant Randy Gillespie, like most Airmen who volunteer for a year-long deployment with the Army, knew this deployment – his 16th in 24 years of service – would take him outside the wire and into harm's way on a daily basis.

As a member of the 3rd Forward Support Depot Embedded Training Team near Herat, Afghanistan, one of Sergeant Gillespie's duties was to mentor and teach members of the Afghan National Army (ANA) to operate fuel distribution points. Sergeant Gillespie quickly earned ANA's trust and confidence. By the summer of 2007, his Afghan partners referred to him as "brother."

On the morning of July 9, Sergeant Gillespie met with his Afghan counterparts and proceeded to the Herat fuel distribution point to manage the operations and conduct training. Insurgents disguised as ANA soldiers approached the site and opened fire on Sergeant Gillespie and his troops, severely wounding several of them. Enemy gunfire struck Gillespie in the left hand, left leg and abdomen. In spite of his wounds, he immediately returned fire and, only after driving off the attackers, called for help. Despite the best efforts of medical personnel who soon arrived at the attack site, Sergeant Gillespie died of his wounds.

Sergeant Gillespie displayed uncommon valor, strength, and courage in the face of lethal enemy fire. Sergeant Gillespie is a hero – not just to Americans, but to the Afghans, the "brothers" he gave his life to serve.





Capt Dennis **HARGIS** A-10 PILOT

On October 14, 2007, HAWG 05, a flight of A-10s led by **Captain Dennis Hargis**, was returning from a mission in southern Afghanistan. He was alerted to an active troops in contact (TIC) situation nearby. Captain Hargis told the controller HAWG flight was available but low on gas. Despite possessing only 20 minutes of fuel and with no refueling tanker close by, but with troops in desperate need of help, Captain Hargis directed HAWG flight to engage the enemy.

As the flight arrived at the scene, a 10-vehicle convoy from the Army's 82d Airborne Division was taking withering fire from both sides of the road they were patrolling. The Soldiers were struggling with numerous severely wounded personnel. Pinned down and unable to move to a medevac helicopter four miles away, the Soldiers' situation was grim.

Though the Soldiers did not have a Joint Terminal Attack Controller to direct CAS responses, Captain Hargis was able to make contact with the convoy, and the ground commander eagerly granted permission for HAWG flight to engage the enemy at ranges dangerously close to the convoy's position. Captain Hargis assumed full responsibility for target identification, collateral damage, and, most importantly, protection of the Soldiers. Captain Hargis and his wingman then aggressively engaged the enemy with their A-10s' 30mm cannon, punishing the enemy with devastating effects and decisively turning the tide of the fight on the ground.

Though several Soldiers sustained serious injuries from enemy action, they all are alive today thanks to Captain Hargis' remarkable heroism.

SSgt Sean HARVELL

COMBAT CONTROL



In spring 2007, **Staff Sergeant Sean Harvell**, a Combat Controller, and his Special Forces team were the leading edge in the battle for control of the fiercely contested Helmand Province in Afghanistan. Months of intense fighting had taken a heavy toll on the team.

On July 25, 2007, the team was tasked to patrol several miles up the Helmand River valley, straight into a Taliban stronghold. The plan was to “move to contact,” a tactic designed to force the enemy to reveal their positions.

From the moment they rolled into the first village, Sergeant Harvell’s team came under heavy fire. The teams fought ferociously, killing dozens of enemy fighters at close range. As darkness fell, an AC-130 gunship notified Sergeant Harvell that the enemy had an elaborate series of trenches and bunkers surrounding his position. As the battle intensified, Harvell directed the gunship to decimate the enemy trench lines. The enemy made frantic attempts to reinforce using motorcycles and trucks. Throughout the night, Sergeant Harvell and his teammates eliminated the insurgents with small arms fire and grenades.

Dangerously low on ammunition, the team decided to make its way out and wait for additional air support. During their movement, enemy fire erupted from every direction. Once they made it back to their vehicles, Sergeant Harvell manned his Humvee’s heavy weapon to suppress the insurgents. At the same time, he coordinated air support. Minutes later, A-10s and an AC-130 gunship arrived and Sergeant Harvell directed precise, devastating attacks on the enemy positions.





SSgt Jason **KIMBERLING** SECURITY FORCES

Staff Sergeant Jason Kimberling, a Security Forces Airman, deployed for a 365-day TDY to Afghanistan as a Qalat Provincial Reconstruction Team member.

On August 8, 2006, while providing embedded force protection for a convoy, his team assisted the Afghan National Police (ANP) and Afghan National Army (ANA) in repelling a Taliban attack at a highway checkpoint. As the convoy approached the checkpoint, 100 well-trained and equipped foreign fighters unleashed an intense ambush with rocket-propelled grenades (RPG), small arms and machine gun fire against Coalition forces in Ebrahimkel Village.

His position was struck by an RPG, knocking him to the ground. Sergeant Kimberling soon recovered from the blast and, while exposing himself to a barrage of gunfire, eliminated two enemy fighters advancing on his position. Sergeant Kimberling's position was struck again by machine gun fire. He directed the ANP troops to lay down a barrage of cover fire. They fired light anti-tank weapons and RPGs, destroying the enemy's bunker and neutralizing the attack.

Enemy gunners continued to hound the convoy. Sergeant Kimberling directed ANA forces to secure the left flank when a small Taliban force pinned down the convoy. Exposing himself again to enemy fire, Sergeant Kimberling coordinated close air support which finally defeated the enemy attack.

Sergeant Kimberling's heroic actions eliminated approximately 20 enemy fighters and saved the lives of three dozen U.S. and Afghani military and police forces.

A1C Chad **KUYKENDALL** TRANSPORTATION SPECIALIST

Airman First Class Chad Kuykendall, deployed to the 424th Medium Truck Detachment at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait, was assigned to conduct routine line haul convoy missions into and out of Iraq.

On July 6, 2007, Airman Kuykendall was performing duties as a truck operator on a nighttime convoy mission. His vehicle commander alerted Airman Kuykendall to sparks trailing their truck, indicating a possible insurgent attack against the vehicle. At that moment all electronics and communication equipment in the truck became inoperable, making it impossible to contact the convoy commander and alert him of the attack. Though traveling at high speed without running headlights, Airman Kuykendall expertly maneuvered his tractor trailer to a safe stop on the highway.

The truck's cab filled with smoke and fire. Airman Kuykendall collected his weapon and additional sensitive items and quickly exited the truck. He realized his vehicle commander was still trapped in the burning cab sitting on top of a 100-gallon gasoline tank. Airman Kuykendall entered the burning vehicle, cut away her gear and freed her. With his vehicle commander injured and unable to walk unassisted, Airman Kuykendall supported her as they moved to the nearest gun truck approximately 100 meters away. Shortly after their escape, the tractor trailer he had been driving was completely engulfed in flames.

Airman Kuykendall's heroic actions saved his comrade from serious injury and possible death despite great danger to himself.





SrA Travis MANNING COMBAT CAMERA

Senior Airman Travis Manning was assigned to the 11th Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa, Djibouti, as a combat camera videographer. His mission was to document the efforts of the United States and Coalition Forces in Djibouti.

In April 2007, he traveled to a small village in northern Djibouti to document a local veterinary civic action program. The team found a routine crossing point along their route flooded out. They also saw a man frantically signaling for help. Airman Manning and his team quickly followed the locals to a point where many people had gathered. Once there, they saw an injured youth stranded on a bank on the opposite side of the rushing waters. Under Airman Manning's leadership the team quickly jumped into action. With only a rope for security, he crossed 75 meters of rising, fast-moving, chest-deep water to reach the stranded youth.

Airman Manning quickly assessed the victim and immediately provided first aid. Seeing he was too weak to cross the river, Airman Manning heaved the youngster on his shoulders and, blocking out the fear and pain, he ignored the danger of the rapid current and began his way back across the river to deliver the young man to safety.

"Anyone of you would have done the same," he said to his fellow Airmen when safely back at their encampment. Airman Manning was later awarded the Airman's Medal for this heroic act.

MSgt Douglas MOORE

EOD

After two deployments to Forward Operating Base Paliwoda, **Master Sergeant Douglas Moore** is no stranger to the hazardous streets of Iraq. His second deployment there took him on more than 350 missions outside the wire,” repeatedly into harm’s way, as he led an explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) team clearing roads of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). “I was fine with returning to Paliwoda,” said Sergeant Moore, then a technical sergeant. “It was better than riding a desk somewhere else.”

On January 11, 2007, Sergeant Moore and his EOD team in partnership with an Army Quick Reaction Force (QRF) headed to the scene of an IED “incident” on a road south of Ad Dulyah in Iraq’s Salah Ad Din Province. Reports indicated an IED was somewhere on the right shoulder of the northbound lane of the road.

As the EOD team was investigating, insurgents detonated the IED and attacked from well dug-in positions, some as close as 75 meters from the Airmen and Soldiers. Sergeant Moore secured the front portion of the convoy’s security perimeter and directed return fire against the insurgents while the QRF platoon leader secured the rear. The insurgents broke contact and fled.

Thanks to Sergeant Moore’s actions and courage under fire in defense of the convoy and his team, there were no friendly losses. He received a second Bronze Star Medal along with the Air Force Combat Action Medal for his actions at Paliwoda.





TSgt Jonathan PRUDEN TRANSPORTATION SPECIALIST

As a lead vehicle commander and convoy commander at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait, then-**Staff Sergeant Jonathan Pruden** knew his job would take him into some of the most dangerous parts of Iraq. With 37 bases depending on his convoys for essential supplies, danger was just one more fact of life.

After months of dodging enemy attacks and leading missions to recover vehicles on “RPG Alley,” an improvised explosive device detonated near his vehicle, crippling it, setting it ablaze, and seriously wounding the driver.

Under direct enemy fire and without regard for his personal safety, Sergeant Pruden exited the truck, pulled out his wounded, entrapped driver, and carried the Airman to the safety of a nearby ditch. He then began to treat and stabilize his injuries until additional convoy elements could arrive to evacuate the injured away from the fire fight.

Sergeant Pruden’s job took him across 17,000 miles of dangerous roads to re-supply the Soldiers, Airmen and Marines fighting to defeat the enemy and give hope to the people of Iraq. Although the enemy tried many times to break the vital supply link that Sergeant Pruden and others provided, his courage, tenacity and level-headedness while under fire ensured his fellow warriors had the supplies they needed to continue the fight.

SSgt Christopher SLAYDON

EOD

Staff Sergeant Christopher Slaydon is an Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team member assigned to the 56th Civil Engineering Squadron, Luke AFB, AZ. On October 25, 2007, while on a joint mission with the Army's 10th Mountain Division in Iraq, he was seriously wounded while attempting to disarm an improvised explosive device (IED). The IED detonated, blinding Sergeant Slaydon and severing his left arm.

The medals he has received from both the Army and the Air Force attest to the fact he is a war hero. For him, Service before Self is the only way to live.

Despite loss of sight and one arm, Sergeant Slaydon is determined to move on with life and continue to contribute. His hard work and dedication have paid off, and he is mastering new skills, participates in numerous activities, and makes increasingly frequent public speaking appearances. His wife, Annette, has been instrumental in his recovery; together, they epitomize the strength and contribution of Air Force families.

Sergeant Slaydon's actions in the aftermath of his traumatic experiences have demonstrated his ability to rise above his injuries and become a tremendous inspiration and example to others – a real hero. He spends much of his time helping other wounded and injured patients at Brooke Army Medical Center. His goal is to further his education and ability to assist wounded service members, especially those with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injuries.





SSgt Rory STURM Jr. SECURITY FORCES

Throughout his deployment to Iraq, **Staff Sergeant Rory Sturm** repeatedly faced danger during more than 70 convoy security sweeps to identify improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and terrorist threats to Coalition personnel.

During his deployment, Sturm became an inspiration to his fellow Airmen. When his installation was violently attacked under a hail of rocket, mortar, and small arms fire, his swift actions to reinforce installation defenses thwarted an insurgent assault and prevented enemy detainees from escaping. On a separate occasion, Sergeant Sturm responded outside the wire to provide emergency treatment for an Iraqi heart attack victim. He assessed the victim's status, provided immediate care and then transported the patient to further medical care, saving the individual's life.

On October 16, 2006, Sturm's courage, combat training and lifesaving skills were sorely tested again when enemy insurgents attacked his convoy near Safwan, Iraq. An IED struck his vehicle, injuring Sturm and the two other crewmembers. He provided immediate medical aid to the injured and then evacuated his grievously wounded gunner from the vehicle. Sturm replaced the vehicle's injured gunner and defended the 12 members of his team against further enemy attack until reinforcements and medical personnel were able to arrive.

Staff Sergeant Sturm's actions under direct hostile fire resulted in the NCO becoming the first member of the 21st Space Wing to earn the Air Force Combat Action Medal. He was also awarded the Purple Heart and Army Combat Action Badge.

Capt Edward TORRES

LOGISTICS

On April 1, 2005, then-1st Lieutenant Edward Torres was on his 35th convoy mission as a Convoy Director of Operations with an Army Battalion in Balad, Iraq. As his team moved along their route, an improvised explosive device (IED) struck a convoy vehicle, seriously injuring a passenger.

Lieutenant Torres' gun truck was first on scene, and his team rushed to provide medical aid and secure the kill zone. The team quickly realized there were multiple "daisy-chained" IEDs which had not detonated. Lieutenant Torres expertly guided his team out of the area and evacuated the injured. His quick and steady actions took the entire team out of harm's way and saved the passenger's life. Later that same day, Torres and his team again came under fire, finding themselves in the midst of a second IED attack. His team quickly secured their position. Lieutenant Torres assessed the situation and directed a call for close air support. A flight of F-16s responded and forced the insurgents to disengage.

On another mission, as Lieutenant Torres led a patrol through the town of Bayji, Iraq, a large IED disabled several convoy vehicles. Torres instinctively took action, directed suppression fire, and prevented further injury and damage. He bravely went into the kill zone to recover three Airmen and a disabled vehicle. These courageous actions allowed his team to safely return to their forward operating base.

Throughout Lieutenant Torres' deployment to Iraq, he applied his combat experience in developing new and effective tactics for defeating IED threats and recovering disabled vehicles from ambush kill zones.



COURAGE

noun

the ability to do something that frightens one;
strength in the face of pain or grief

Courage is what makes someone capable of facing extreme danger and difficulty without retreating. It implies not only bravery and a dauntless spirit but the ability to endure in times of adversity

**Portraits in Courage is designed and produced by
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**For information regarding Portraits in Courage contact
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Note: Many of the Airmen featured in this publication are wearing the Army Combat Uniform (ACU). All are in compliance with USAFCENT uniform policy. The Air Force will soon transition to the Airman Battle System-Ground uniform which will provide enhanced force protection for Airmen serving in contingency operations and negate the requirement to wear the ACU.





U.S. AIR FORCE