

Triangle of Courage

By Sgt. Maj. Walter S. Zapotoczny Jr.

On Sept. 19, 2005, three of Harrington's platoon members, including his platoon leader, were killed after being attacked with an improvised explosive device. He immediately volunteered to be part of a reaction force to respond to the scene.

"I was kind of itching to go over there," said Harrington, a New Cumberland native assigned to Company A, 1st Battalion, 172nd Armor, as a member of a long-range surveillance and sniper team.

Along with another platoon, he left his base and moved into a known high-threat area with little friendly presence. As the two Humvees in his group were moving to the scene, his vehicle was struck with an IED, tearing off the front of the vehicle.

Disoriented from the explosion and suffering from a possible concussion, Harrington physically checked the crew in his vehicle for injuries. Then he exited the destroyed vehicle and began to engage the enemy positions.

As he was engaging the enemy and providing cover fire, he was exposed to enemy small arms fire. As the platoon sergeant hooked up a tow strap and began to pull Harrington's vehicle away from the enemy fire, this vehicle also was destroyed by an IED, knocking the platoon sergeant out of his Humvee.

Seeing this, Harrington exited the second vehicle to help a medic begin first aid on the wounded platoon sergeant. With the two Humvees now disabled and without communications, Harrington grabbed a radio out of his bag and established communications with headquarters. He continued to expose himself to enemy fire while communicating on the radio and provided security until help could reach his position.

After the recovery effort was completed, he assumed additional risk by moving with his team to sweep the unsecured area looking for the IED trigger man and other insurgents.

"A real hero is what you see in Spc. Harrington," said Brig. Gen. Jerry Beck, 28th division commanding general and speaker at Harrington's awards ceremony.

"I was just doing what I had to do," said Harrington, who was presented the Silver Star in a ceremony held at the Harrisburg Military Post on Dec. 27, 2008. "I think any other Soldier would have done the same thing."

According to his citation, Harrington's calm under fire and personal courage were directly responsible for saving lives on a day when many more lives could have been lost.

Everything for the men

Assigned as the 2BCT effects officer, Lt. Col. Michael E. McLaughlin, of Mercer County, became the second 28th Division Soldier to receive the Silver Star in the Global War on Terrorism. As part of his job, he met personally on numerous occasions with sheiks and the governor of Al Anbar Province in order to promote the participation of the local populace in economic and political progress to further the transition of the province into a unified Iraqi nation.

As a result, he was a major contributing factor to the overwhelming turnout of Iraqi Police recruits at the glass factory in western Ramadi during the Jan. 2-5, 2006, recruiting drive. During this period 750 recruits were screened compared to none at previous events.

On Jan. 5, 2006, McLaughlin went to the glass factory to interact with the potential recruits. He had received intelligence



Into the crucible

As the name somewhat innocently implies, the Sunni Triangle of Iraq is bordered by three major cities: Baghdad in the south, Ramadi to the west and Tikrit to the north. But within these boundaries boils a not-so-innocent cauldron of religious extremism and violence, fueled largely by Ramadi's status as religious center and capital of Al Anbar Province, and in part by hosting the main railway line into Syria.

Into the second year of ground operations for Operation Iraqi Freedom, American commanders had long suspected Ramadi as the very kitchen for terrorist activity. Al Qaeda insurgents happily stirred the pot by disrupting the newly elected democratic government and creating chaos.

Pennsylvania's 2nd Brigade Combat Team was sent to stop them. By the time their tour was over, three members of Pennsylvania's 28th Infantry Division had been awarded the Silver Star for their actions – thus lending the embattled Sunni Triangle another name: triangle of courage.

Back from the 'kill box'

By September 2005, the 2BCT had been in Ramadi about three months while helping to neutralize the insurgency and train the fledgling Iraqi Security Force. Considered then to be in the most dangerous place on earth, 2BCT Soldiers displayed great courage on a daily basis, none more so perhaps than Spc. Jason D. Harrington.



School is letting out as Spc. Jason D. Harrington, foreground, and his team are on the way back from patrol. Photo: Courtesy of Jason Harrington



Lt. Col. Michael E. McLaughlin, left, pins rank upon one of his 2BCT sergeants. Photo: Army Global War on Terrorism Enhanced Research Library

reports indicating the possibility of grenade and suicide vehicle-borne IED attacks on the recruits by insurgents.

At great personal risk, he mingled in the crowd of over 300 civilian recruits, instructing his Soldiers to be on the lookout for civilians carrying concealed weapons or explosives. A suicide bomber infiltrated the crowd and detonated an explosive device, killing and wounding numerous Iraqi civilians and Soldiers. McLaughlin was struck in the head by shrapnel.

Refusing treatment, he told the Soldier checking him to concentrate on saving the lives of his men. McLaughlin succumbed shortly thereafter from his wounds.

“Mike died doing his job the only way he knew how – out front with great enthusiasm and courage,” said Brig. Gen. John L. Gronski, commander of the 2BCT. “He was a very close friend.”

“Col. McLaughlin was a hands-on leader who died working to ensure Iraqis will one day be able to provide their own security,” said Gov. Edward G. Rendell.

According to his citation, McLaughlin displayed calm under fire and personal courage, placing the lives of his men before his own. He was awarded the Silver Star posthumously.

So others may live

Spc. Brian M. Sheetz, from Connellsville, was a loader on an M1-A1 Abrams tank, assigned to Company C, 1st Battalion, 103rd Armor, located approximately 80 kilometers west of Baghdad. He would soon become the third 28th Division Soldier to earn the Silver Star for the 2BCT.

On Feb. 27, 2006, Sheetz’s tank was conducting a 24-hour security operation on a dangerous supply route known for having a large number of IEDs and insurgent attacks.

At approximately 9:30 a.m., his tank was ambushed by insurgents using anti-tank grenades. The crew felt a concussion from the first grenade which impacted on the back of the turret. Just then, another grenade was thrown inside the tank, landing at the feet of the crew.

With complete disregard for his safety, Sheetz quickly grabbed it and yelled, “Grenade!” He put himself between the grenade and the crew members to ensure their safety while throwing it out of the loader’s hatch. As he threw it out, the grenade detonated, with shrapnel lacerating his hand and face.

Sheetz said he was hit and could not see. Even though he lost vision in his left eye, Sheetz wanted to stay and secure the area. The other members of the tank crew were uninjured.

“I don’t remember much about the incident,” said Sheetz. “I was looking out of the hatch, scanning the area, when I saw the grenade. The next thing I remember is waking up in the aid station and seeing the face of a nurse.”

But the incident seems to have left Sheetz with better vision far beyond that of his eyes.

“[It made me] realize what we have here,” said Sheetz. “People don’t realize what we have. It took a war and a grenade for me to realize it.”

According to his citation, Sheetz’s calm under fire and his personal courage undoubtedly saved the lives of the members of his crew.

Epilogue

During the 11 months that the 2BCT conducted counter-insurgency operations, they made tremendous progress in the Ramadi area and weakened the insurgency significantly. With the help and cooperation of the citizens of Al Anbar Province, the Iraqi Police and the Iraqi Army, they neutralized or detained more than 2,400 insurgents and removed thousands of munitions and explosives from the street. The elections of December 2005 were a huge success, with approximately 60 percent of the voting population of Ramadi participating. The Iraqi Police and the Iraqi Army made significant gains and began to take on more responsibility with a renewed sense of national pride.

But the dramatic achievements of the 2BCT were not achieved without a price. As of June 11, 2006, 81 combat team Soldiers were killed in action. The three stories highlighted here are characteristic of the many gallant actions carried out by numerous combat team Soldiers while serving in Iraq. Other members of the combat team earned more than 26 Bronze Stars with Valor and 215 Bronze Stars, 53 of them awarded posthumously. More than 340 Purple Hearts were awarded, with more than 50 posthumously.

Spc. Harrington, Lt. Col. McLaughlin and Spc. Sheetz demonstrated conspicuous gallantry in action while fighting in the Global War on Terrorism. By placing their comrades’ lives before their own and displaying calm under fire and personal courage, they earned the Silver Star and will live on in history for creating a triangle of courage. ❖

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Spc. Brian M. Sheetz checks his configurations aboard an M1-A1 tank. Photo: Army Global War on Terrorism Enhanced Research Library