PORTRAITS IN COURAGE

Airmen in the Fight
As you read this second volume in The Chief of Staff’s Portraits in Courage series, you will discover stories of Airmen who demonstrated great courage while accomplishing their missions. Whether in the air over trouble spots or on the ground in dangerous urban environments, or on the ridges of precipitous mountain passes, our Airmen continue to demonstrate their mettle in the face of danger.

The thirteen courageous Airmen highlighted here are but a small sampling of the tens of thousands of currently deployed Airmen who courageously fulfill their missions day after day in harm’s way. As you peruse these stories it becomes abundantly clear that our nation is at war and American Airmen are on the front lines, taking the fight to the enemy by employing all aspects of Air Power. While personal sacrifice is a resounding theme in these vignettes, in each circumstance our Airmen persevered to accomplish the mission despite tremendous challenges. Often, these efforts saved the lives of others as well.

These stories of bravery and fortitude echo our warrior ethos: “I am an American Airman. I am a Warrior. I have answered my Nation’s Call.” The heroic acts of today’s Airmen prove the Airmen’s Creed is more than just words – it embodies the warrior ethos by which we live and fight.

Clearly, Airmen are making a difference in today’s fight. I invite you to read of a few examples in the pages that follow.

T. MICHAEL MOSELEY
General, USAF
18th Chief of Staff
During the approach, the landing zone erupted with fire from insurgents. In this critical phase of flight, Sergeant Ezell received a gunshot wound to the head caused by an accidental weapons discharge from inside his helicopter. Maintaining his crew position, he alerted his fellow crewmembers he was hit. The team leader and medic immediately responded and began treating Sergeant Ezell.

The recovery process for Sergeant Ezell has been grueling, though he faces every challenge with an unrelenting determination and optimistic attitude. He has endured a continual string of surgeries in Iraq, Germany, and Walter Reed Medical Center as well as the most advanced reconstructive surgery available at Johns Hopkins. Throughout his long road to recovery, Sergeant Ezell has continued to display the warrior mentality, continuously advancing his recovery and finding renewed strength to improve each day.

Before his last deployment, Sergeant Ezell was featured in an Air Force commercial that depicts him walking off of the tail of the PAVE LOW. In the commercial, he says, “I’m Staff Sergeant Eric Ezell and I have the best job in the Air Force.”

Shortly after arriving at Walter Reed, his commander walked in and Sergeant Ezell exclaimed, “Sir, I think I want to re-shoot that commercial!” His positive attitude serves as an inspiration to all.
Capt Groves then made three attempts to return to the location of the downed aircraft and recover its crew. During the first two attempts, his aircraft came under intense ground fire. In both cases, his superb airmanship and skillful crew coordination defeated the threat. Undeterred, Capt Groves made a third attempt to rescue his fellow airmen. After his crew located the downed aircraft, he conducted a flawless approach under zero illumination conditions, in an extremely high-threat area, and placed his aircraft only 200 feet from the crashed aircraft. On the ground, he directed his crew and three Special Forces passengers to locate and recover the personnel from the damaged helicopter.

Once the survivors were on board, he readied his overloaded aircraft for takeoff. Once more, Capt Groves’ piloting enabled the aircraft to safely takeoff. As he gained flying speed on departure, he was again engaged by enemy fire. For the fourth time, he executed successful defensive maneuvering and defeated the enemy threat. His gallant actions and tremendous pilot skills saved the lives of nine fellow service members.

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Soon after accomplishing a formation go-around due to a busy landing zone, the lead aircraft was ambushed and shot down by insurgents. Barely 100 yards behind, Capt Groves and his crew watched in shock as the stricken lead helicopter, hit directly in the cockpit by a rocket-propelled grenade, began a rapid, uncontrolled descent towards the ground. Seconds later, Capt Groves’ aircraft was engaged with fierce small arms fire and an additional rocket-propelled grenade. He performed evasive maneuvers, directed his crew to dispense countermeasures, and steered his aircraft away from the threat area flying as low as 50 feet amidst power lines and buildings to avoid further detection.
Early in the evening, a lone vehicle rapidly approached the convoy. Airman Holihan followed the rules-of-engagement (ROE) to the letter and calmly challenged the potential threat. The vehicle failed to yield and continued to quickly close on the convoy. Airman Holihan was well within the ROE to directly engage the threat, but showing great restraint fired warning shots and stopped the vehicle. His self-discipline proved accurate. The driver was an Iraqi national confused and unaware. The convoy continued on.

Forty-five minutes later, as Airman Holihan conducted his standard visual security sweeps around the formation, a vehicle not associated with his convoy triggered an improvised explosive device (IED) immediately in front of the lead vehicle. The convoy halted to assess the situation and Airman Holihan scanned the area for enemy threats. “As I visually cleared the area I saw specks of green light floating around my head. Since I had never seen green tracers, I wasn’t sure what I was seeing, but once I heard the distinct whizzing of small arms projectiles I knew I was being shot at.”

Daylight investigation revealed that two insurgent snipers had triggered the IED thinking the vehicle was the lead vehicle of Airman Holihan’s convoy. Their supposed intent was to stop the convoy, cause confusion and target the US personnel during the disorder. Airman Holihan’s quick thinking and accurate employment of his weapon crippled the insurgents’ objective. One of the snipers had fled the scene while the other was confirmed killed. Airman Holihan’s precision engagement had saved the lives of his teammates and ensured mission success.

Airman Holihan has since deployed two more times since his brave actions.

The firing intensified and he saw muzzle flashes not more than 30 meters to the convoy’s left. Since he was in the trail vehicle his turret was facing aft. As he tried to rotate his turret to engage the threat with his .50 caliber, the turret jammed facing aft. With streams of enemy tracer fire flying past his head, Airman Holihan grabbed his M4 carbine and returned fire. He emptied a 30-round magazine before the enemy ceased firing. With the engagement over, the convoy continued on its mission without casualties or damage to the vehicles.

Deployed to Iraq, Senior Airman Casey Holihan was a member of a night combat patrol in Tikrit on May 9, 2005. The 23-year-old security forces Airman’s mission was to man a .50-caliber gun truck in a joint convoy with 52 Army and Air Force personnel.

SrA CASEY HOLIHAN
SECURITY FORCES

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MSgt BOB JACKSON
MUNITIONS CRAFTSMAN
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Sergeant Jackson’s seven-person team of munitions specialists normally prepared, built, and stored bombs, rockets, and bullets for use on A-10 aircraft. On this day however, they were working to dispose of more than 300,000 pounds of extremely unstable munitions that had been stockpiled for years by the Iraqi military.

Smoke billowing from a stack of munitions caught Sergeant Jackson’s eye. It was a smoldering 120mm projectile packed with white phosphorus. Sergeant Jackson raced through the possible resultant scenarios in his mind. None were good. He knew white phosphorous was highly flammable, unpredictable, and extremely dangerous. He also knew the smoking weapon had to be snuffed out.

Had the shell ignited in his hands the situation would have been grave for him, but he was more worried about his team than his own welfare. If the shell had exploded in the stockpile it would have triggered a mass detonation that would have rippled through the bomb dump, killing the team and fourteen others in the immediate area.

Sergeant Jackson’s selflessness can’t be overstated, but he tries to keep it in perspective. “There are a lot of guys out there who put their lives on the line all the time,” he said. “I was just doing what needed to be done.”

What he didn’t know was how long he had before the projectile would detonate. Scanning the area, the sergeant saw a man-made pond about 100 yards away. Without hesitation, he picked up the 30-pound projectile, dashed across the bomb dump and tossed it in the reservoir. “I didn’t have time to think,” he recalled. “It’s just action and reaction. When you cut off oxygen to white phosphorus, it will stop burning.”

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On 27 July 2007, during a village assessment and presence patrol mission in a remote area of northeastern Afghanistan, Staff Sergeant Patrick Lape, a Joint Terminal Attack Controller assigned to support “Task Force Bayonet,” directed the action of five combat aircraft to include two A-10s, two French Mirage 2000s, and a Predator Unmanned Aerial Vehicle to provide close air support when his team came under enemy attack.

SSgt PATRICK LAPE
TACTICAL AIR CONTROL PARTY

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While on patrol, Sergeant Lape’s team received small arms fire from multiple locations. They immediately secured a fighting position, and Sergeant Lape used his radio to provide a communications link for his team while at the same time calling in close air support to engage the enemy for the next two hours.

Shortly after the combat aircraft left the area, the team again came under attack, this time by sniper fire. During the ensuing battle, a team member accidentally slid down a hill onto the road below exposing him to direct enemy fire. Sergeant Lape maneuvered to his position and safely helped him to an area that offered cover from the enemy. While Sergeant Lape was helping the team member, the company commander maneuvered to Sergeant Lape’s position to provide additional fire support. The company commander then decided to move the element to a more defendable position.

Throughout the fire fight Sergeant Lape maintained clear focus, and though the soldier received traumatic injuries, Sergeant Lape’s immediate actions saved his teammate’s life and allowed him to be medically evacuated to receive life-saving follow-on care.
Staff Sergeant Scott Lilley volunteered for a 365-day deployment to Iraq to train local police forces and conduct joint patrols with them in the volatile urban environments of Baghdad.

On one mission, Sergeant Lilley’s team was to secure a site and conduct training with Iraqi police to improve their tactics and ability to protect local streets. Sergeant Lilley manned the .50 caliber machine gun in the third vehicle of his convoy as it proceeded down Route Irish for an Iraqi police station in Baghdad. As the convoy approached an Iraqi checkpoint, an improvised explosive device detonated underneath the front-passenger’s side of Sergeant Lilley’s vehicle. The vehicle was disabled and immediately came under intense small arms fire.

When he returned to the United States, Sergeant Lilley had little to no ability to speak or move. In the hospital, Sergeant Lilley showed the same courage he had displayed on the battlefield. He amazed and scared his doctors by getting out of his bed and sitting in a chair – a feat they did not think he was capable of accomplishing.

Sergeant Lilley has attacked his physical therapy with enthusiasm and vigor and continues to amaze his doctors. He is now able to walk and talk. Although he faces a long road to recovery, Sergeant Lilley is determined to beat the odds.
As the battle intensified, Sergeant Miller removed ammunition from the deceased and proceeded through some of the battle’s heaviest rocket-propelled grenade, mortar, and small arms fire to distribute the ammunition from position to position. Another attack soon erupted that killed one pararescueman and compromised the casualty collection point. Sergeant Miller braved the barrage of fire to move the wounded to better cover and concealment to prevent further loss of life. His actions led to the successful delivery of ten gravely wounded Americans to lifesaving medical treatment and to the recovery of seven servicemen killed in action. Sergeant Miller’s heroics during the 17-hour firefight are depicted in a painting commissioned by the National Guard Bureau, “The Battle of Takur Ghar.”

Sergeant Miller and the assault force formed a hasty defense against the enemy. They immediately suffered four fatalities and five critical casualties. During the ensuing battle, Sergeant Miller moved throughout the battlefield despite concentrated enemy fire and repeatedly crossed open danger areas to assess and care for his critically wounded teammates.
Then–Senior Master Sergeant Dean Sprague charged into a perilous situation to rescue others in spite of tremendous danger to himself. On April 25, 2006, while deployed to the Helmand district of Afghanistan, an AN-32 transport plane crashed on landing as it swerved to avoid a truck sitting on the runway. The airplane plowed into a nearby village, scattering dirt and debris and collapsing several structures.

Having safely removed all personnel from the wrecked aircraft, Sergeant Sprague then focused his rescue efforts on the village. He directed his team to begin pulling out women and children trapped under mounds of rubble caused from the crash. Within minutes his team had rescued a 2 1/2-year-old child and a 13-year-old girl from an area near the crash site.

Sergeant Sprague realized a villager’s house had been completely destroyed by the crash as a woman screamed and pointed to what remained of her home. Without delay, Sergeant Sprague worked through the rubble of the destroyed home and searched for trapped family members. Despite the fact that his team had no proper tools immediately available, they began to dig through the dirt with their bare hands. His efforts were immediately rewarded as he pulled a crying but unharmed 20-day-old baby out from under the dirt.

Three times on this day, Sergeant Sprague selflessly demonstrated the high calling spelled out in the Airman’s creed—"I will never leave an Airman behind, I will never falter, and I will not fail.” His selfless actions saved many lives and underscored an Airman’s steadfast commitment to others.
In one instance, Sergeant Velasquez’s convoy was en route to the U.S. Embassy when it was hit by an improvised explosive device. The vehicle directly in front of Sergeant Velasquez was heavily damaged and two of its passengers were killed. His vehicle’s turret gunner fell into the vehicle on fire and suffered severe shrapnel wounds to his left arm. Sergeant Velasquez quickly extinguished the flames, stopped the bleeding, and administered life-saving medical aid. Instead of moving directly to the safety of the embassy, Sergeant Velasquez remained on the scene, scanned the area for enemy and assisted the remaining casualties.

On another mission, his convoy came under attack by small arms fire and rocket-propelled grenades resulting in several casualties. Under withering fire, Sergeant Velasquez left his vehicle to tend to two wounded Afghan soldiers stranded in a disabled vehicle. He removed the most severely wounded from the wreckage to an area behind a small rock wall that offered cover. Under constant enemy fire, Sergeant Velasquez remained with the American and Afghan casualties providing medical care for several hours until the survivors were evacuated.

“I was only doing my job, nothing special.”

Those who have received life-saving medical attention in the heat of battle from Staff Sergeant David Velasquez would argue otherwise.
On the evening of November 2, 2006, Major Walker’s PRT was ambushed en route to their forward operating base. The teams are trained to return fire, break contact with the enemy, move to a safe location, and coordinate close air support. This particular engagement proved to be different. As the team broke contact and repositioned the convoy, a separate enemy force attacked them again. Major Walker’s team was engaged six times over the distance of ten kilometers, and each time he coordinated fires and returned fire as well. When the enemy attacks finally ceased, the team elected to find a location to remain for the night to repair a damaged vehicle. The next morning as the team was preparing to complete their move to the forward operating base, the radio operator intercepted enemy communications indicating they were about to attack. Major Walker directed his team to take up fighting positions.

Since receiving life-saving medical care in both Germany and the United States, Major Walker’s determination has enabled a recovery that none of his physicians believed possible, including learning how to walk again. Amazingly, Major Walker returned to duty after only four months of rehabilitation and continues to serve in the Air Force.
Smoke immediately filled the cargo compartment and made its way to the flight deck, filling the aircraft with toxic fumes. After alerting the crew and his fellow loadmaster, Sergeant Webb directed the passengers to don their emergency oxygen masks while securing his own mask.

Sergeant Webb worked feverishly for the next several minutes to revive the passenger. His efforts were rewarded when the passenger began breathing on his own. After realizing the passenger was breathing again, he turned to see another passenger slumped over with similar effects. Sergeant Webb ripped off another failed oxygen mask and replaced it with a new one. Once again his efforts were rewarded when the passenger regained consciousness.

After the crew safely landed the aircraft, medical personnel treated each passenger. The attending flight doctor concluded the first passenger would have perished had it not been for Sergeant Webb’s quick actions.

The crew took action to eliminate the smoke and fumes and declared an in-flight emergency. After a few minutes, Sergeant Webb noticed one of the passengers slumped over in his seat. He ran to the victim’s side and realized that the victim was unconscious. Sergeant Webb, with complete disregard for his own safety, replaced the victim’s mask with his own. The passenger was unresponsive, so Sergeant Webb immediately began rescue-breathing procedures.
His team was on a reconnaissance mission supporting a larger Coalition forces offensive designed to clear Panjaway Valley of all Anti-Coalition militants (ACM). Intelligence estimated 800-1000 ACM in the district, threatening Kandahar’s security. This opening sequence would lead to a week-long battle for the valley and surrounding terrain. During this time, Sergeant West and two of his JTAC teammates were on the hill, working multiple aircraft, orchestrated by Sergeant West’s battlefield awareness and ingenuity for dividing airspace and platforms. The air support included French, British, Dutch, and American fighters, bombers, attack helicopters, AC-130H gunships, and UAVs. In concert with their teams’ ground maneuvers, they tirelessly engaged the enemy with airpower until the aircraft needed to refuel or rearm. Throughout the Coalition operation, Sergeant West called in MEDEVACs, controlled resupply airdrops for ammo, food, and water, and coordinated 130 CAS missions including 15 separate troops-in-contact missions.

The Coalition forces achieved decisive victories throughout the district regaining control of the area and killing an estimated 750 enemy combatants. Sergeant West’s masterful situational awareness and precise employment of Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance and CAS assets were vital to the battle’s overall success.
Airman Worthington and his explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) team quickly assessed the situation and found command wire running from the blast site to a nearby abandoned house. As the EOD team and Army security team continued analyzing the house where the command wire was anchored, a second IED exploded, instantly killing one team member and injuring seven others.

Almost immediately the area erupted in small arms fire. Using his body as a shield, Airman Worthington placed himself in front of his injured team leader and returned fire. Additional teammates joined the fight, and together they moved to a more secure fighting position and engaged the enemy. The firefight lasted approximately 20 minutes until the enemy was suppressed and fled the scene.

Airman Worthington, along with the security detail, killed two of the insurgents and injured four others who were later found with multiple gun shot wounds. After the chaos subsided, he helped carry the wounded personnel to the medical evacuation helicopter. His focus and bravery during the heat of battle ensured the survival of his team and allowed the medic to provide critical care to the severely injured.

Airman Worthington, who was ten feet from the deadly device when it exploded, was thrown to the ground by the blast and lost hearing in his left ear. Quickly regaining his bearing, he immediately rendered self-aid and buddy care to his EOD team leader, who had sustained multiple severe shrapnel wounds to his body. Once Airman Worthington had his team leader taken care of, he turned to another injured team member and assessed his wounds. As he worked on his teammate, a medic arrived and took over.

— PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

Speech at the Air Force Memorial Dedication
14 Oct 2006

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For information regarding Portraits in Courage contact the SECAF and CSAF Executive Action Group at DSN 227-5540 Commercial (703) 697-5540
U.S. AIR FORCE

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