



Master Sgt. Michael Lindsay (top, right) poses with other Soldiers on a mountain in Colorado. (Photo courtesy of Master Sgt. Michael Lindsay)

By Example: Special Forces NCO Prepared His Mind, Body for Combat

By Jonathan (Jay) Koester

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This story is part of a periodic NCO Journal feature that takes a closer look at an Army award in an NCO's career. This month we focus on the Silver Star.

Master Sgt. Michael Lindsay is the Special Forces Advisor to the Alaska National Guard, 196th Infantry Brigade, Fort Shafter, Hawaii. But on Sept. 10, 2007, he was a Sergeant First Class serving as detachment communications sergeant with Operational Detachment Alpha 083, 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) when he earned the Silver Star for actions in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom in Samarra, Iraq.

"We had received intelligence that there was a weapons cell and a training cell in the outlying deserts of Samarra, Iraq," Lindsay said. "So we did a mission using two Black Hawks, and we put down outside of the village. We had to put down in an alternate landing zone because the pilot saw that the original landing zone was a giant marsh, so that threw our plan into chaos."

The change in landing zones meant the Black Hawk had to land less than 30 meters from the enemy, throwing any element of surprise out the window. With the dust causing brown-out conditions, Lindsay, along with Staff Sgt. Jarion Halbisengibbs and Capt.



Then-Sgt. 1st Class Michael Lindsay kneels after a firefight that re-took a village in Iraq. (Photo courtesy Master Sgt. Michael Lindsay)

Matthew Chaney took fire immediately. Iraqi police were supposed to take the lead on the mission, but with the poor conditions and bullets flying, the Iraqis froze, leaving the three Americans to take on the enemy force.

“We fought our way into the nearest building,” Lindsay said. “We used a grenade to enter the building because we saw personnel and weapons on the inside. We followed the grenade in and we took heavy fire from that first room. I was shot in my stomach, and the two guys I was with, both were also shot. We returned fire, and we continued to engage the enemy through the house.”

All three were then hit by an enemy grenade at close range. All three were seriously injured, and

Lindsay and Chaney were blown out of the house.

“I thought I was in a little bit worse than trouble because I knew was hit in the stomach,” Lindsay said. “I couldn’t tell how bad. There was some bile coming up in my throat. Bile and blood, which is never good. And then I saw the black blotches in my eyes. And when you see that at night, that’s not good either. I was struggling to stay conscious. Really I was trying harder to stay conscious than to aim my weapon because I knew if I passed out, I was going to die; they were just going to walk up and shoot me. So that’s what I was thinking. More than aiming my pistol I was thinking, ‘Just don’t pass out. If they’re going to kill you, they are going to have to put up a fight. They’re certainly not going to walk over here and kill me.’”

“We essentially just staved off the enemy until the rest of the team managed to get to us. Once they had established a base of fire and suppressed the enemy

into a couple of different buildings, we were carried to the Black Hawks. Once we got accountability of everyone we were medivaced out.”

All three injured Americans survived, while a total of 11 enemy fighters were killed in the battle, according to Lindsay’s Silver Star citation.

How do your actions that day show the best of the U.S. Army NCO corps?

The NCOs, they are really what make the Army go. In the NCO creed it says they are the backbone of the Army, and I think NCOs should always lead from the front. I think an NCO should always be in the thick of the fight, living out the warrior ethos. Being

part of the Special Forces is unique because it's really only NCOs. There are few officers, and there are no privates. So being a part of that, I saw the best of the NCO Corps every single day, and I made it a personal mission to live up to that standard that I saw.

What do you hope your Soldiers and junior NCOs can learn from your actions that day?

When I think back to it, I think the most important part of me surviving that was how hard I trained my body and spirit. A lot of people look at PT as something they do each morning as just part of the routine. But that's not what it's all about. It's not about just being physically fit or just looking good at the beach. I look at it as preparing your mind and body for the worst possible circumstances. Once you face that adversity, once you get hurt, once you are under extreme duress and the adrenaline is pumping, it prepares you to drive on and succeed with the mission. If I didn't train myself physically so hard, I don't think I would have made it. But I was in what I consider to be tip-top physical condition, my mind was strong because I had put myself through countless severe training events, and I was strong, my constitution was strong, and I think that's why I still here today.

After you landed, your Iraqi partners apparently didn't help much. How did you deal with that?

I learned the hard way on several occasions that you can go and train these armies and all that other stuff and turn them into legitimate soldiers, but when the bullets start flying, it's only the other Americans you can really rely on.

You were seriously injured, and then 11 months later you were back serving in Iraq. Tell me how, physically and mentally, you were able to do that.

Like I said, physically, I have trained my body to sustain itself, and I healed really fast and the doctors were like, hey, it's definitely because you take such good care of yourself. But also, I have established a high expectation. I was back doing physical stuff probably a lot quicker than I should have been, but I had the expectation that I was going to heal, I was going to get back to where I was, and I was going to get back into the fight. I didn't want to let my comrades down. To me, the worst possible scenario was the last time I was ever on the battlefield, I was getting carried off, wounded, unable to defend myself. That would have been the worst possible thing. So I made it my mission in life to get back to where I was to prepare for the next deployment. So I did that, and I'm happy about it.

Why have you continued to serve, after all you've been through?

I've always enjoyed being in the Army. Leaving the Army at a time of war, to me, is almost criminal. I just couldn't have turned my back on the Army at any point during the past 10 years. I was in the same unit, 10th Special Forces Group, for the entire Global War on Terror. So I knew guys intimately, I'd worked with them for a long time. So, I could never leave the Army during that time. And the Army is important to me. It's made me everything I am today. The lessons that I know as a man were taught to me in the Army. I know at some point my time in the Army is going to come to an end, but for me, it will be a sad day, because the Army is all I've really known. I've flourished in it, and it's been good to me.

What makes a good NCO?

I think a good NCO is defined by a few things. It begins with technical and tactical knowledge. As an NCO, you have to know what you're talking about. It's also about the ability to lead, to mentor and to motivate. A good NCO in my opinion can do the job of his officer and enlisted superiors. And he can also do the job of his subordinates. The NCO has to be the master of all trades. Essentially, what goes into a good NCO is not only being able to do the job, but being able to teach others to do the job and motivate them to be the best they can be.

Are there any changes you'd like to see happen Armywide?

I think about this a lot because I've seen it come full circle. When I came in during the late '90s, there was no war. There was the "garrison army." And now it's going back to that, with Iraq gone and Afghanistan going to be gone soon, we're sinking back into that garrison mindset. I don't really like it. What I'm hearing a lot from the upper echelons is trying to enforce new standards about trimming sidebars and trying to dictate how people dress on the weekends. What I want to hear is, how can we improve the force with, let's say, better, more focused combat PT? How about instilling some legitimate performance standards, or instituting more realistic training? When I came in, all anyone cared about or talked about was boots and haircuts. When 9/11 happened, we were caught with our pants down because we were an undertrained, under-equipped Army. And what I fear is that's going to happen again and we are going to forget all the lessons we have learned.

What advice do you have for junior NCOs?

In the past 10 years, the Army changed, and one of the things that changed a lot was that the promo-

tions were at such an accelerated rate that people were essentially outgrowing their abilities. Everybody wants to get promoted and expects to get promoted, but I would tell the junior NCO to be really careful what you ask for, because being a mid-level leader is the most fun in the Army, I think. You're still in the fight, you have a chance to interact with Soldiers every single day, you have a chance to do a lot of things that you don't get to do when you are a senior-level NCO and you are stuck at a staff job. My advice would be, stop worrying about getting promoted. Start worrying about being more proficient in your job. I think the Army would be a lot better off if people stopped worrying about getting promoted and just applied themselves in their day-to-day jobs.

What impact have you seen NCOs make on Soldiers?

An NCO can make or break or Soldier. A good NCO can make a good Soldier out of just about anyone. I've seen Soldiers that everybody was ready to give up on and throw to the wayside, but a good NCO took that Soldier under his wing, made that Soldier feel like a person, an individual, and slowly made a good Soldier out of him, chipped away all the bad pieces and made something out of him. I've seen great NCOs make great Soldiers out of ordinary Soldiers. So, when I talk to NCOs whom I respect and they reminisce about their younger days of being a Soldier, each one of them was affected by a great NCO, so I know for a fact that every great NCO was spawned from another great NCO. ■



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