



From left, Mahoney, Pfc. Benjamin Secor and Command Sgt. Maj. Kevin Griffin, all with the 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, are seen during Mahoney's previous deployment to Regional Command-East, Afghanistan, in 2012. Griffin was killed by a suicide bomber attack in Asadabad, Afghanistan, Aug. 8, 2012, the same attack in which Mahoney was wounded. (Photo courtesy Sgt. Andrew Mahoney)

NCO Who Tackled Suicide Bomber Named USO Soldier of the Year

Staff Sgt. Whitney Houston

ISAF Regional Command-South

People, like coal, under the right conditions of pressure and heat, can be transformed from their raw material or potential into gems.

Sgt. Andrew Mahoney, a Laingsburg, Mich., native, who was recently named the USO Soldier of the Year, has been in that refining process of heat and pressure since he joined the Army in 2007. A communication specialist with the 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Mahoney has shaped himself into an invaluable noncommissioned officer.

"Mahoney's been in the brigade for almost seven years, and he's already on his third deployment with the

same unit," said Master Sgt. Philip Brennan, who serves as brigade communications chief with the 4th IBCT. "He is our subject-matter expert when it comes to tactical communications. He's our hub in the brigade, filling a slot of a senior member as a young NCO, because of his very advanced skill as a communicator."

Brennan explained that Mahoney didn't become a master of his trade overnight.

"He has made himself smart on a lot of communications systems. He's a qualified digital master gunner, which is very important in the signal (communications) world. It allows you to become masters of local area

networks in tactical environments and to cross-level that knowledge over to other systems, and to train the upcoming generation of Army communicators.”

Mahoney served on personal security details his first two deployments, protecting the brigade commanders and command sergeants major in their comings and goings. One day, while on his second deployment in Regional Command-East, he and his PSD team were escorting their brigade commander, Col. James Mingus, Command Sgt. Maj. Kevin J. Griffin, and others to a security meeting in Asadabad, Afghanistan. They suddenly found themselves in an attack coordinated by two suicide bombers. Mahoney and his platoon leader at the time, then-1st Lt. Florent Groberg, reacted quickly to the attack.

“It was like an eight-second window of when we realized what was happening. As soon as we rounded a corner, they (the suicide bombers) came out. We didn’t have time to process a thought, it just happened and we reacted,” Mahoney said.

Both Mahoney and Groberg proceeded to tackle one of the suicide bombers, and in the process, the explosives strapped to the assailant detonated.

“If I lost consciousness, it was only for a brief moment because he exploded. Things were fuzzy for just a second or two, and the next thing I knew, I was standing almost in the same spot, just in a cloud of dust,” Mahoney said. “I had some pretty bad flesh wounds on my arm, my shoulder and all up the back of my legs. But my body armor worked, I’ll tell you that much.

“The first thing I did is I looked down at my arm and it was all jacked up. It was a mess; you could see the bone and everything,” Mahoney said.

He looked up and saw Mingus on the other side of the street and rushed himself and his commander behind cover. Mingus then helped Mahoney tie a tourniquet to Mahoney’s arm.

Mahoney said he didn’t see Groberg until U.S. medical personnel were evacuating them out of the area by helicopter.

“I later found out that he (Groberg) had been blown across the street. He’s still recovering from a pretty bad wound to his leg, and is going through rehabilitation at Walter Reed [National Military] Medical Center” in Bethesda, Md.



Sgt. Andrew Mahoney

Reflecting back on the incident, Mahoney can’t fully explain how exactly he and Groberg walked away from it.

“The only thing that we can conclude is that the blast went more into the ground than it did into us. But we don’t know.”

The second suicide bomber detonated right after the first one, which did considerable damage to the group, Mahoney said.

“We lost four people that day. We just passed the two year anniversary on Aug. 8.”

Command Sgt. Maj. Griffin, Maj. Thomas E. Kennedy, Air Force Maj. Walter D. Gray, and Ragaei Abdelfattah, a representative of the U.S. Agency for International Development, all died that day.

Mahoney was awarded a Purple Heart for wounds sustained, and a Silver Star for putting his life on the line that day for his comrades. More importantly, Mahoney brought away life lessons from the scene that continue to shape the way he lives daily life.

“I would say personally, more than professionally, I value living life every day, and I don’t sweat about the small stuff because it could have all been gone in an instant,” Mahoney said. “I wasn’t uptight before, but I am just less so now.

“Since those guys didn’t get to walk away from that incident the way we did, I live every day as a homage to them,” he said.

Mahoney married his wife Melanie as he was recovering from his wounds in the hospital in San Antonio. They now live in Fountain, Colo., with their two small children — Corbin, who is four years old, and Brooklynne, who is two.

Brennan explained that in the early spring, Mahoney will be assigned to the 7th U.S. Army NCO Academy in Grafenwöhr, Germany, where he plans to pass along his communication knowledge onto the next generation of signal NCOs.

“We thought this assignment in Germany would be perfect for him ... to pass along his knowledge as a communications professional,” Brennan said.

Brennan has known Mahoney for less than a year, but immediately saw his value. When petitioned to put him in as a candidate for the USO Soldier of the Year, Brennan immediately got the paperwork turned in. Mahoney will receive the USO award in October.

“He’s got a dedication to serve, a dedication to his craft, and he’s a very humble young man,” Brennan said. “He totally deserves this award. He has learned a lot, and still has a lot to learn as an NCO. But whatever path he chooses, I have no doubt that he’ll do it well.” ■



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