



After being struck by an improvised explosive device in Baqubah, Iraq, a Bradley Fighting Vehicle immediately caught fire with its occupants still inside. Then-Spc. Christopher B. Waiters attempts to climb into the burning vehicle to rescue a trapped Soldier. Waiters had previously treated and evacuated two other casualties back to his Stryker. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

By Example: Combat Medic Braved Enemy Bullets, Flames to Save Soldiers

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NCO Journal

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 career of an NCO who was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. The Distinguished Service Cross is the Army's second-highest award, behind only the Medal of Honor. AR 600-8-22 says of the Distinguished Service Cross, "The act or acts of heroism must have been so notable and have involved risk of life so extraordinary as to set the individual apart from his or her comrades."

Then-Spc. Christopher B. Waiters, a combat medic, had just finished a long overnight clearance mission with the 3rd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division, in Baqubah, Iraq. He and his team had been out since 10 p.m., so about 8 a.m. the next morning, April 5, 2007, Waiters laid down to get some sleep.

"Then I just heard this thunderous boom," Waiters said. "First it was like, 'Whoa, what just happened? Wake up everybody!' Then over the radio you hear, 'Hey! We have guys in a burning [Bradley]!' [Using my nickname], my XO, 1st Lt. Timothy Price, said, 'Hey Voodoo, let's roll!'"

"So we go, and it's just us two trucks," Waiters said. "It wasn't very far away, maybe a 3-minute drive. We came around a corner, and as soon as we did, we started getting shot at. So, I faced my vehicle east, he faced his west. Two bad guys came out, and I immediately raised my weapon and dropped them. We were about 120 meters from the burning [Bradley], and the whole road was on fire. There were people everywhere, just scattered."

Waiters didn't immediately think of the consequences of his next decision. He quickly decided he



Gen. Peter W. Chiarelli, then the vice chief of staff of the Army, presents the Distinguished Service Cross to Staff Sgt. Christopher B. Waiters on Oct. 23, 2008, during a ceremony at Fort Lewis, Wash. (Photo by Phil Sussman)

had to run to the burning Bradley Fighting Vehicle despite the incoming enemy fire. Price told him not to leave because he wouldn't make it back.

"Next thing you know, I was going down the road," Waiters said. "I didn't think about the decision I had made until the bullets were already coming at me. That's when you think about, 'What have I done?' After that, it was just pure adrenaline and fear."

Halfway to the Bradley, Waiters was pinned down by enemy fire. Then a truck came around the corner, firing from a gun turret on the back. "Tim, my XO, destroyed the driver and gunner with his .50-cal, which allowed me to keep running down the road."

After dropping his weapon and gear because of the weight, Waiters jumped on top of the Bradley and pulled two Soldiers out. He treated the two Soldiers and evacuated them to safety, but he then learned there was a third Soldier still trapped in the back of the Bradley.

"So I ran back down 'Death's Alley,' as I like to call it," Waiters said. "By that time, my whole unit had converged on me. It turned into a rescue mission. We had snipers up, and they were taking guys out. We had platoons moving and clearing as they made their way down."

Roaring flames prevented Waiters from reaching the third Soldier from the top of the Bradley, so he kicked open the back door. He tried again and again to reach the Soldier through the flames. On his fifth attempt, he was able to grab the Soldier and pull him out, but the Soldier had already died. Waiters secured his body and proceeded on with the mission.

"I had melted boots, melted gloves," Waiters said. "I had been shot in my [body armor] plates front and back a few times. I had a long 60 minutes of, 'I shouldn't be alive.'"

Another medic on the scene, Sgt. Jeffrey Anello, told the Fort Lewis, Wash., Northwest Guardian he was shocked when he surveyed the wreckage.

"Seeing the Bradley smoldering and knowing he was able to retrieve two of the Soldiers in it alive, it was amazing," Anello said. "By the looks of it, nobody should have been alive. We're very proud of Sgt. Waiters, [after] serving alongside him for three-and-a-half years. It sets a standard for us, of putting others before yourself, to do your job."

For his actions that day, Waiters received the Distinguished Service Cross. Waiters is now a staff sergeant serving as a platoon sergeant with the 1st Squadron, 71st Cavalry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, at Fort Drum, N.Y.

Tell me how your actions that day represent the best of the U.S. Army.

A lot of people call me a hero. I don't think I'm a hero. I think every Soldier is a hero because they raise their right hand, and they're willing to die. I think it's just looking out for people you don't even know. I didn't know those Soldiers. To me, they just wore my uniform. Those are brothers. They would have helped me on any given day. My job is a medic. If that's what I have to die doing, that's what I have to die doing. That's what I signed up for.

What do you hope your Soldiers can learn from the actions you took that day?

Never give up, and always give your best. What I always tell my Soldiers is that you can't save everybody, but you can save people. It's all about, are you willing to die that day to do it? Are you willing to stick to that oath that you solemnly swore to do? Do that to the fullest, everyday of your life. That's what makes you a Soldier. It's not a 9-to-5 job. It's a career. It's a life choice you make. You just have to be able to conquer your fears and go out and give it your all.

What makes a good NCO?

A good NCO is a guy who you know you can count on. A good NCO is not that screamer, that barker, anymore. A good NCO is the guy who can look at you and say, "I'm disappointed," and you, as that Soldier, are going to take that to heart. A good NCO is the guy you can call any day of the week. A good NCO is going to get you the answers. He's going to work harder to make your life easier. ... It's guidance. It's wisdom. It's a guy who can take what he did as a young Soldier and take it and teach it to the rest, so that we become a successful corps.

What role have NCOs played in your development?

I got some good leadership. They guided me in the right direction. But I grew up with, "Don't come back

without the mission being accomplished," even if it was just, "Go to S-1 and get this." It was always, "Get the mission accomplished."

What advice do you have for young Soldiers and other NCOs?

Be patient. The new guys want to get in there; they want to be leaders. But they need to watch what their leaders do, instead of just trying to jump in there. They need to ask questions. A lot of new NCOs don't want to ask those questions because they feel like they're stupid. They're not stupid; you're learning. If they are open to learning, they are going to be successful NCOs. You have to give respect and earn it at the same time. Back in the day, you could just yell at all Soldiers. That's the way it was. Now, you need to know every one of your Soldiers. You need to know that you can't raise your voice to this guy, because he'll shut you out. Once a Soldier shuts you out, there's no getting to them. Then you have to know that you can talk to this other guy in a calm tone of voice, and that's worse than yelling at him. You have to understand them, know their backgrounds, their families, all that stuff. With the new Army, you have to know each individual Soldier; you can't treat them all as one unit.

What is your MOS, and how did you get into it?

I'm a 68W (health care specialist). I was originally a 91B, combat medic. The recruiter sat down at the house, and he went over all the MOSs. Of course he started off with all [maneuver] series. And my dad sat there and said, "Infantryman? No. Armor? No." My dad was a retired sergeant first class. It came to 91B combat medic. I like medicine. You can't save all, but I can save as many as I can. It's interesting. I think it's the most gratifying job you can have. You're respected by all. ■



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