

Someone You Should Know

by Brigadier General Carol Eggert and Captain Wendy (Kosek) Buckingham



Capt Wood and COL Eggert at the triage center after the attack – August 21, 2009

WHILE DEPLOYED to Baghdad, Iraq on August 21, 2009, 10 U.S. service members from the Air Force and Army, a mix of active duty, reservists, and guardsmen; officer and enlisted, most of whom had never met each other, boarded a multi-vehicle convoy of Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles (MRAPs) heading from Camp Victory to the International Zone (IZ) in Baghdad, Iraq. The day started as any other day would by simply taking a military convoy from one duty location to another, however, en route to the IZ, one vehicle in the convoy—our vehicle—was struck by an explosively-formed projectile (EFP).

Upon impact, our vehicle was downed in the middle of the Red Zone in Baghdad, and shrapnel was forcefully scattered throughout the vehicle, injuring the majority of the seven passengers seated behind the gunner.

In the seconds after the blast, each of us remembers a slightly different account of events. Some passengers remember a loud boom, and others remember complete silence. Some remember a lot of communication between passengers and others remember minimal communication. What is clear from all the accounts is that what we all remember as minutes where time moved in slow motion, in actuality, were just seconds of time quickly passing in a chaotic environment, commonly known as ‘temporal distortion.’

After the impact, each passenger began to assess their injuries, the injuries of those around them, and the damage to the vehicle. Army Major Randy Klingensmith, sitting closest to one of the impact sites, sustained the greatest physical injuries including severe injuries to both of his legs. Captain Maureen Wood, an Air Force JAG officer seated next to Major Klingensmith, sustained shrapnel wounds to her face and legs. Captain Wendy Kosek, a fellow JAG officer seated directly across from Captain Wood, sustained minor shrapnel wounds to her left hand, left leg and a shrapnel wound to the left side of her jaw, where a piece of shrapnel completely severed the chinstrap on her helmet. Captain Kosek’s most severe injury was a shrapnel wound to her right leg that shattered her tibia below the knee.

Inside the downed MRAP, each passenger had been injured in some way by the blast, but immediately, the passengers—the majority of whom were total strangers united only by their desire to serve their country—came together as a unified team. After the blast, the first words that Captain Kosek remembers came from the gunner, a female Army Specialist, who called out: “IED, IED, IED.” Another passenger began assessing the injured and called back to Camp Victory for medical assistance. Subsequently, the driver opened the back of the vehicle and began evacuating passengers. Those more seriously injured were cross-loaded and physically lifted to another vehicle in the convoy.

Once inside the other vehicle, Captain Wood provided bandages to stop Major Klingensmith’s leg from bleeding.



Maj Wood, Capt Buckingham, and BG Eggert – Sept 2013

Army Colonel Carol Eggert, the senior officer in the vehicle, and other service members kept talking to the Major to help him maintain consciousness

and applied pressure to his wounds. Captain Kosek sat on the floor of the aisle way directly in front of the Major. Army Sergeant First Class Joel Quebec sat in the seat next to her and held her hand and talked to her while Army Major Mark Piccone held her right ankle between his legs to prevent her right leg from hitting the floor and causing more damage en route to a triage unit at Camp Victory.

At the triage unit, Major Klingensmith and Captain Kosek were put on gurneys and separated from the group, but they were not alone. Colonel Eggert came to their sides. While Captain Kosek was being treated for her injuries, Colonel Eggert, who she did not previously know, held her hand and asked her about her life back home. In those moments, Colonel Eggert sacrificially put aside her own injuries and comforted another wounded service member.

Lines of distinction between service branches did not exist that morning. The jobs that we all specialized in—infantry, JAG, public affairs, contracting—did not matter. What mattered is that a group of brave American service members came together as a cohesive team, did what was necessary to keep each other alive, and ensured no one was left behind. We all owe our lives to the actions of the team that day.

Alive Day—Brigadier General Eggert:

MG(R) Jessica Wright, former Adjutant General of the Pennsylvania National Guard, called me in Baghdad a few days after the attack and told me that August 21st was now my Alive Day. I was so grateful to get her call but at that point I didn't really understand the concept of Alive Day. It was later, when I visited the damaged MRAP and saw that the entry point of one of the rockets was only a few inches from my head and saw the shredded uniform that had been hanging next to my seat, that I intellectually understood Alive Day but I still had no feelings of a close call.

Immediately after the attack I heard only silence, I stared at the windows and admired the patterns of the shattered glass. I was in a daze and couldn't

move. I only learned several weeks later at our post event brief that I was knocked over and was unconscious for a few minutes. At the clinic I told the medics that my ear hurt but that I was fine and wanted to check on the others. I think it was a combination of being the senior officer in the vehicle and being a mother that caused me to have an inexplicable urge to assist the others—most were the age of my daughters or younger. That day a bond that I will never understand nor could explain was created with those men and women. Until that day I knew none of them, but I now think of them as my beloved brothers and sisters in arms.

Now more than three years after that attack, on August 21st I think of the phrase Alive Day but I have renamed it Gratitude Day, the day I came to fully understand how much I had to be thankful for.

I am grateful for the team that day who knew exactly what to do—pull security, tend to the wounded and evacuate as quickly as possible. I am grateful that no one died that day. I seldom think about my injuries; I think of all the others who have been so seriously wounded and I am grateful that they are getting the care and support they need.

I am grateful for Col. Sam Hayes, a member of the Pennsylvania Guard who was stationed in Iraq, but miles away. He came to check on me, and I will never forget the joy of seeing a familiar face and sharing my story with a fellow soldier.

I am grateful for the VA who provided excellent care upon my return as I continued to suffer from cognitive issues. I am grateful for my fellow faculty colleagues at the US Army War College, where I stationed after my deployment, who were very understanding when my hyper startle reflex was triggered every time they walked into my office. They learned to tap on the wall as they approached my door. They were most patient as I struggled to find

words mid-discussion; they pretended they didn't notice. I am also grateful for all the members of the PA Guard family that welcomed me home and continue to provide excellent support to our redeploying soldiers.

I am grateful for Gen. Peter Chiarelli, former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, whom I met at a dinner after my return. When he learned of my experience in Iraq and looked at my ribbons he practically ordered me to submit a packet to HRC for the award of the Purple Heart. This was at the time that he campaigned tirelessly to have TBI recognized as an injury. I am grateful for the efforts BG(R) Jerry Beck and LTC Maureen Weigl who prepared and submitted that packet more than 18 months after the attack.

These are all not uncommon examples of our military community doing the right thing, the right way, every day and I am grateful that I am a member of that community and that I have the opportunity to serve.

Recently at a Veteran's Day Parade, I was approached by a WWII veteran, who when seeing my ribbons and noticing the Purple Heart, started to comment, "What's a (I was certain he was about to say "what's a woman doing with a Purple Heart?" as I have heard from so many who reasoned if women weren't allowed in combat how could they receive combat awards), but he went on to say, "What's a Colonel doing with a Purple Heart? You don't see that very often!" I smiled at my own mistake and became grateful that we have come so far and that most people see women simply as soldiers.

Resilience On and Off the Battlefield—Captain Buckingham:

It is rare that we come literally within millimeters of living or dying, maybe not as rare among this audience, but on August 21, 2009, I did come that close to dying. Before my fourth and most intensive surgery at Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC) in San Antonio, Texas, my orthopedic surgeon told me that the piece of shrapnel that shattered my right tibia had lodged itself right behind my knee within two millimeters of my femoral artery. When I was in the MRAP, I had my right leg bent, and after the doctors at BAMC created a computerized reenactment of the bomb's impact, my surgeon told me that had my leg been straight, my femoral artery would have been cut by the shrapnel.

Before the injury at twenty-six years old, I was unstoppable, patience was not a virtue I was that familiar with, and I did not understand what "never" meant—like the phrase, "you will never run again." In an instant, I went from running mile after mile to being relegated to a hospital bed with a catheter. When I was being transported from the triage unit at Camp Victory to an American-run hospital in Baghdad, I remember asking the doctor how bad my leg was. She told me that my leg was broken in at least two places. At the time in my morphine-induced state, two breaks did not sound that bad. Several weeks later, I realized that the triage doctor told me that my leg was broken in at least two places by looking directly into my leg—no x-rays had been taken at that point—and that is when the reality of how badly broken my leg was started to set in.

Over the next eight months, I received daily doses of frustration and equal doses of patience.

In life, you can laugh or cry. I am not a big fan of crying and I would choose to laugh any day over crying. As a result, when the nurses removed the bandage from the skin graft donor site and used a strong light to try to dry it out every day, I joked that my leg was 'going to the beach.' If I was laid up in a hospital bed, at least part of me could get a tan. I also referred to the incentive spirometer that I was supposed to use as "my game," the "game" that I "played" several times every day to prevent pneumonia. Being wheelchair-bound taught me a lot of unique lessons that walkers typically are not blessed to know. I learned very quickly that the majority of engineers who design sidewalks must never have been in a wheelchair because if they had, they would never make sidewalks that run uphill and require twice as much effort to overcome. I also realized that asking for help as much as I hated it was not a bad thing and it usually meant that I would eat a better lunch in the hospital cafeteria, especially because I could not see over the counter in my wheelchair to pick my food. I also learned that attempting to use crutches all the way from the Fisher House to the orthopedic section of the fifth floor of a huge hospital in part to prove to myself that I could do it and in order to prevent my Mom, who I love, from continuing to treat me like a five-year-old was exhausting, but worth it.

During those months of rehab, I hated feeling like I was

someone else's burden because I was dependent on other people. Thankfully, I was blessed with an incredible support network of family, friends, hospital staff, and Air Force leadership that supplied daily doses of encouragement, visits, flowers and cards. Not getting better fast enough was my biggest frustration, but I could not force my tibia to regrow by will alone. I found accomplishment in small victories, like gaining a few more degrees in my range of motion and looked forward to eventually leaving rehab.

Within a month of returning to active duty, I remember walking down the hall to get something when I heard my phone ring. Instinctively, I turned and tried to run back to my office to answer the phone. Pain seared through my right leg and I suddenly realized that even though I had been released from the hospital, my body was not the same and my leg was still healing. A little less than four years after the attack, I can run to answer the phone, and finally, I can run at least a couple miles. Now I

find a great sense of accomplishment when people have to ask me which leg was injured because I am wearing pants and they cannot detect a limp or imperfection in my gait. I have learned patience, but I still do not understand what "never" means because I refuse to use that word in my life.

For as much as we attempt to plan our lives, and I know I did, God's plan always prevails and it creates an extraordinary mosaic of events, people, and opportunities that we could never fathom by relying upon our own understanding and creativity. Like Brigadier General Eggert, my Alive Day is my Gratitude Day that showed me how much I have to be thankful for. ✧

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Captain Maureen Wood is now a Major currently serving on active duty at Joint Base Andrews, Maryland and she is a MOPH lifetime member. Patriot Wood, her husband Brian, and daughter Brooklyn recently celebrated the newest addition to their family, Caleb Patrick Wood.

MOPH 2014-2015 Scholarship Application

THE MOPH 2014-2015 scholarship application is currently available online on the MOPH website and the deadline to submit applications is 5 p.m. EST on February 11, 2014. The MOPH Scholarship Program is very competitive and only a small portion of applicants are selected each year to receive scholarships. Approximately 75-85 scholarships of \$3,000 are awarded each year in addition to the Lieutenant Michael P. Murphy Scholarship Award. This year, Folds of Honor has generously agreed to provide funding for up to ten spouse scholarships of \$5,000 each in addition to the other Purple Heart scholarships that will be awarded.

To be eligible for a Purple Heart scholarship, applicants need to meet one of the following four criteria: be (1) a Purple Heart recipient who is also a member of MOPH, (2) his/her spouse or widow, (3) his/her direct lineal

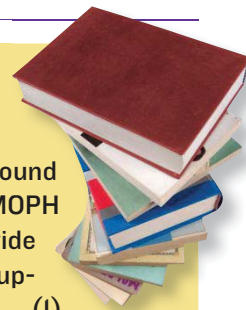
descendent (child, stepchild, adopted child, or grandchild), or (4) the spouse, widow or direct lineal descendent of a service member killed in action or who died of wounds. Great-grandchildren are not eligible to apply.

The recipient of a Purple Heart scholarship must meet the following three requirements: (1) be a graduate or upcoming graduate (current senior) of a high school, or (2) accepted by or enrolled as a FULL-TIME undergraduate student at an accredited U.S. college, university or trade school at the time the scholarship is awarded, and (3) be able to demonstrate the capacity for advanced academic achievement or technical proficiency as demonstrated by at least 2.75 cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA) based on an un-weighted 4.0 grading system. Graduate students are not eligible to apply.

To apply, applicants need to complete the MOPH Scholarship

Application Form found online on the MOPH website and provide the following supporting materials: (1) original, official high school and/or college transcript, (2) essay of 200-300 words on the subject, "The American Veteran", (3) two letters of recommendation, and (4) a non-refundable \$15.00 processing fee. An applicant can receive a maximum of two scholarships awarded in non-consecutive years. Additionally, applicants should provide detailed information about extracurricular activities and honors, community and/or military service, and employment experience to be competitive.

If you have any questions about the MOPH 2014-2015 Scholarship Application, please contact Patriot John Logan or Patriot Wendy Buckingham, the National Scholarship Co-Chairs. ✧





Purple Heart

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Staff Sergeant Ty M. Carter

MEDAL OF HONOR
OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM

