VOLUME 1 SPRING 2007

PORTRAITS IN COURAGE

AIRMEN IN THE FIGHT

PORTRAITS IN COURAGE

General T. Michael Moseley, the 18th Air Force Chief of Staff, developed the "Portraits in Courage" series to highlight the honor, valor, devotion and selfless sacrifice of America's Airmen

The Chief of Staff's Portraits in Courage

Inside the pages of this book you will find stories of Airmen who have shown tremendous courage in time of war: the physical courage to leap into harm's way to protect comrades; the moral courage to continue to serve our country despite enormous obstacles; and the emotional courage to focus on the mission despite harrowing circumstances. These vignettes represent all that is good about the Airmen of our Total Force – courage, bravery, selflessness, compassion and commitment.

Ours is a generation that proudly stands on the shoulders of heroes. Airmen of the past proved their mettle in the skies and on the ground in places like Saint Mihiel, Ploesti, Regensburg, Schweinfurt, Rabaul, MiG Alley, Hanoi, DESERT STORM, Mogadishu and Roberts Ridge. Their stories are the basis of our extraordinary heritage and the foundation of our boundless horizon.

Today our Airmen's courage is on display in operations at home and around the world. As you read these profiles, remember the bond we share as Airmen. At our core, we are expeditionary; we take the fight to our enemies; we are resourceful and innovative, pushing the boundaries of air, space, and cyberspace. At our core, we realize that while technology *distinguishes* our service today, technology does not *define* our service. *Courage* defines our service. It always has and always will.

This inaugural volume of ***The Chief of Staff's Portraits in Courage*** series serves to remind us all of the courage and sacrifice of America's Airmen.

T. Michael Moseley
General, USAF
18th Chief of Staff

Fly, Fight and Win!

MAJOR TROY GILBERT

PORTRAITS IN COURAGE

Maj. Troy Gilbert's life epitomized the core value of Service before Self. Whether flying the F-16, spending time with his family, or helping with a church function, he gave unselfishly of himself to serve and protect others.

Such was the case on Nov. 27, 2006, the day Major Gilbert was killed in action protecting others. The 12-year Air Force veteran was assigned to the 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing at Balad Air Base, Iraq. He had already completed 21 combat sorties in the F-16 supporting ground forces under enemy fire. On one mission, he found and identified anti-Iraqi forces, then passed critical targeting information to coalition forces, who attacked and eliminated the threat. In another time-sensitive mission, Major Gilbert destroyed 10 insurgents concealed in a palm grove with the pinpoint delivery of a laser-guided weapon.

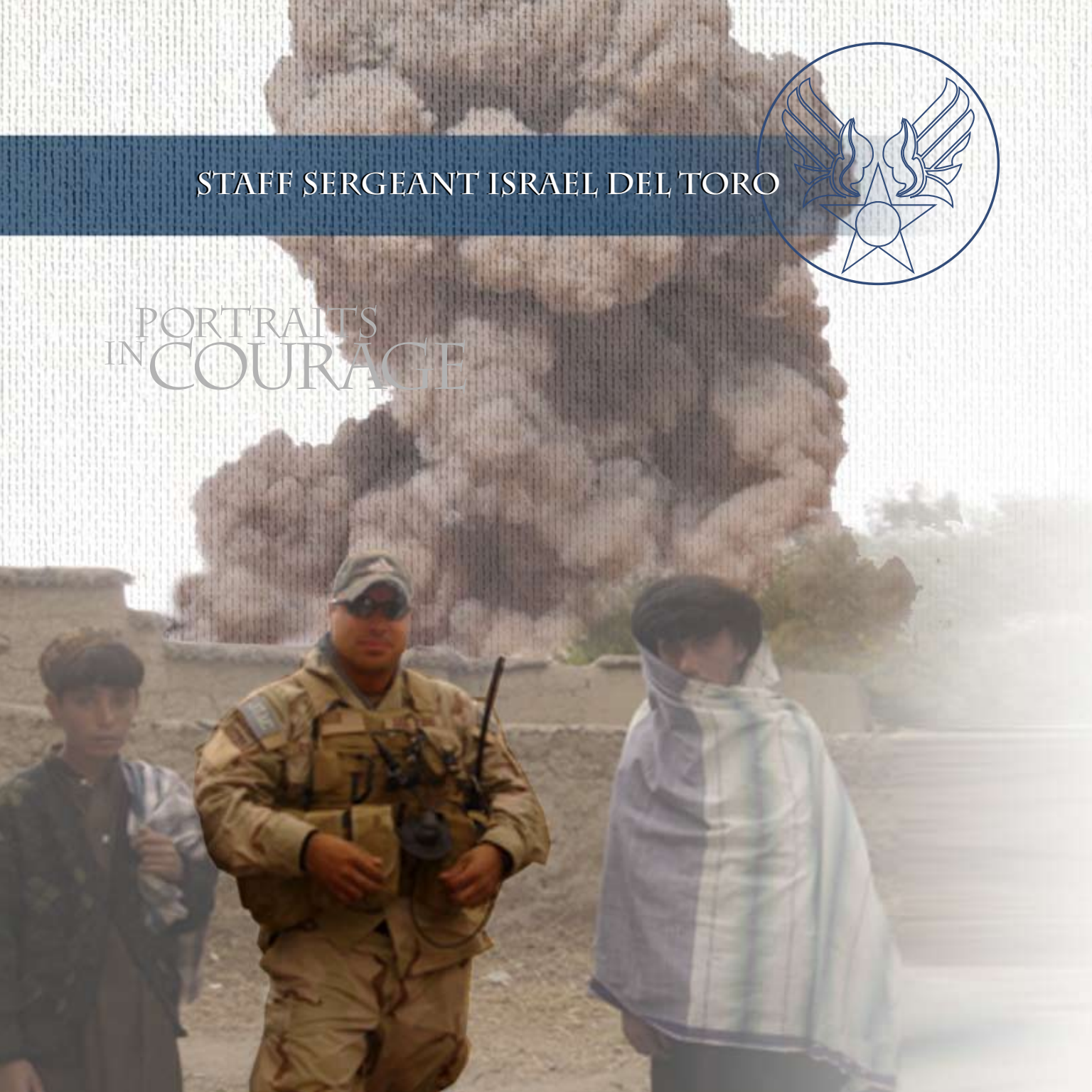
On the day he died, Major Gilbert heroically led a flight of two F-16s in an aerial combat mission near Taji, Iraq. On the ground, insurgents were unleashing truck-mounted heavy machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, small arms fire and mortars to attack coalition troops. In addition, a downed Army helicopter crew was in danger of being overrun. Engaging the enemy meant certain anti-aircraft fire for Major Gilbert, but despite the danger, he went after the insurgents. He launched a strafing attack against the truck, destroying it with his 20-millimeter Gatling gun.

Despite enemy fire, Major Gilbert continued to press the insurgents with a second strafing pass at extreme low-level to help save the lives of the helicopter crew and other ground forces. He lost his life on that strafing pass when his aircraft hit the ground.

Major Gilbert's final act of moral and physical courage was conducted selflessly, just as he had always lived his life.

STAFF SERGEANT ISRAEL DEL TORO

PORTRAITS IN COURAGE



“I’m just a regular guy who loves his job. I just happened to get hurt.” That is how Staff Sgt. Israel “D.T.”Del Toro Jr., describes himself. But to those who know him, his drive and determination despite being burned over 80 percent of his body make him a hero.

Sergeant Del Toro is a Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) operator currently recovering from his severe injuries. TACP operators control airpower in support of the ground forces commander.

On the fateful day in 2005 that he was injured, he was the Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC) on a mission with soldiers of the 2nd Battalion of the 503 Infantry Brigade in Southern Afghanistan. Sergeant Del Toro is a jumpmaster and master parachutist with more than 110 jumps. He also completed Army Air Assault Training.

On Dec. 4, 2005, the lead vehicle Sergeant Del Toro was riding in was hit by an improvised explosive device while crossing a creek. Engulfed in flames, the nine-year Air Force veteran hit the ground and tried to put out the fire.

“I remember thinking I was never going to see my family again,” Sergeant Del Toro said. But a lieutenant from his team dragged him into the creek, telling him, “Don’t worry D.T., you’re not going to die here.” The lieutenant was right; Sergeant Del Toro survived.

Since that day, Sergeant Del Toro has fought for every inch of recovery his body and spirit have made. He has endured many hard days filled with surgeries, skin grafts and grueling physical therapy. Consistent with his humble attitude, he credits the love and closeness of his family and support of the Air Force for the progress he has made thus far. His heart remains that of an Air Force warrior, and he wants to remain a part of the TACP career field. If his recovery does not allow him to return to the job he loves, he would like to use his experience to help others as a liaison for military burn victims.

When confronted by those who wonder how he maintains a positive outlook despite his circumstances, he quotes baseball great Lou Gehrig by saying, “You might think I got a bad break, but I’m honored to have worked with some of the greatest guys out there.”

SENIOR MASTER SERGEANT DALE BERRYHILL

PORTRAITS IN COURAGE

While supporting Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, Senior Master Sgt. Dale Berryhill, an airborne mission systems specialist, risked his life to save his fellow crewmembers on May 19, 2003.

After a re-supply mission near Erbil, Iraq, Sergeant Berryhill and crew were flying back to their forward operating base. At about 17,000 feet, a coolant gas-fed fire erupted with blowtorch intensity just forward of Sergeant Berryhill's duty position.

Smoke and flames quickly engulfed the cargo compartment and flight deck, filling the entire aircraft with toxic fumes. As other crewmembers began donning their personal protective gear – oxygen masks and smoke goggles – Sergeant Berryhill reacted instinctively and without hesitation. He knew the survival of the crew and aircraft depended on putting out the fire.

With complete disregard for his life and without the protection of an oxygen mask and smoke goggles, he retrieved a fire extinguisher and headed toward the fire as the aircraft descended at a high rate of speed. Charging down a narrow maintenance corridor and disappearing into a wall of smoke and flames, he attacked the source of the lethal fire. Sergeant Berryhill single-handedly began fighting the inferno as other crewmembers still struggled to put on their personal protective gear in near zero visibility.

Sergeant Berryhill inhaled large amounts of toxic fumes as he battled and eventually extinguished the flames. With his eyes blurred by the smoke, he navigated his communications systems panel by feel to relay MAYDAY calls to multiple command and control platforms. He remained at his smoke-filled post during prolonged periods when there was no contact with the flight deck.

After obtaining clearance to land on a taxiway at Baghdad International Airport, he cleared all incoming air traffic and arranged for fire and rescue while the defenseless aircraft came under two small arms and rocket-propelled grenade attacks. Battling his own physical fatigue, he plotted with pinpoint accuracy the coordinates of the enemy fire and notified coalition forces of the exact location.

During the 13 minutes of extraordinary heroic action, from the beginning of the fire until touch down, Sergeant Berryhill completed his duties flawlessly despite suffering from severe smoke and toxic fume inhalation. After landing, though nearly physically incapacitated, he refused medical treatment and remained with the aircraft to continue updating command elements. Nearly three hours later, he was taken to the flight surgeon at his forward location for treatment of severe smoke inhalation.

TECHNICAL SERGEANT MICHELLE BAREFIELD

PORTRAITS IN COURAGE

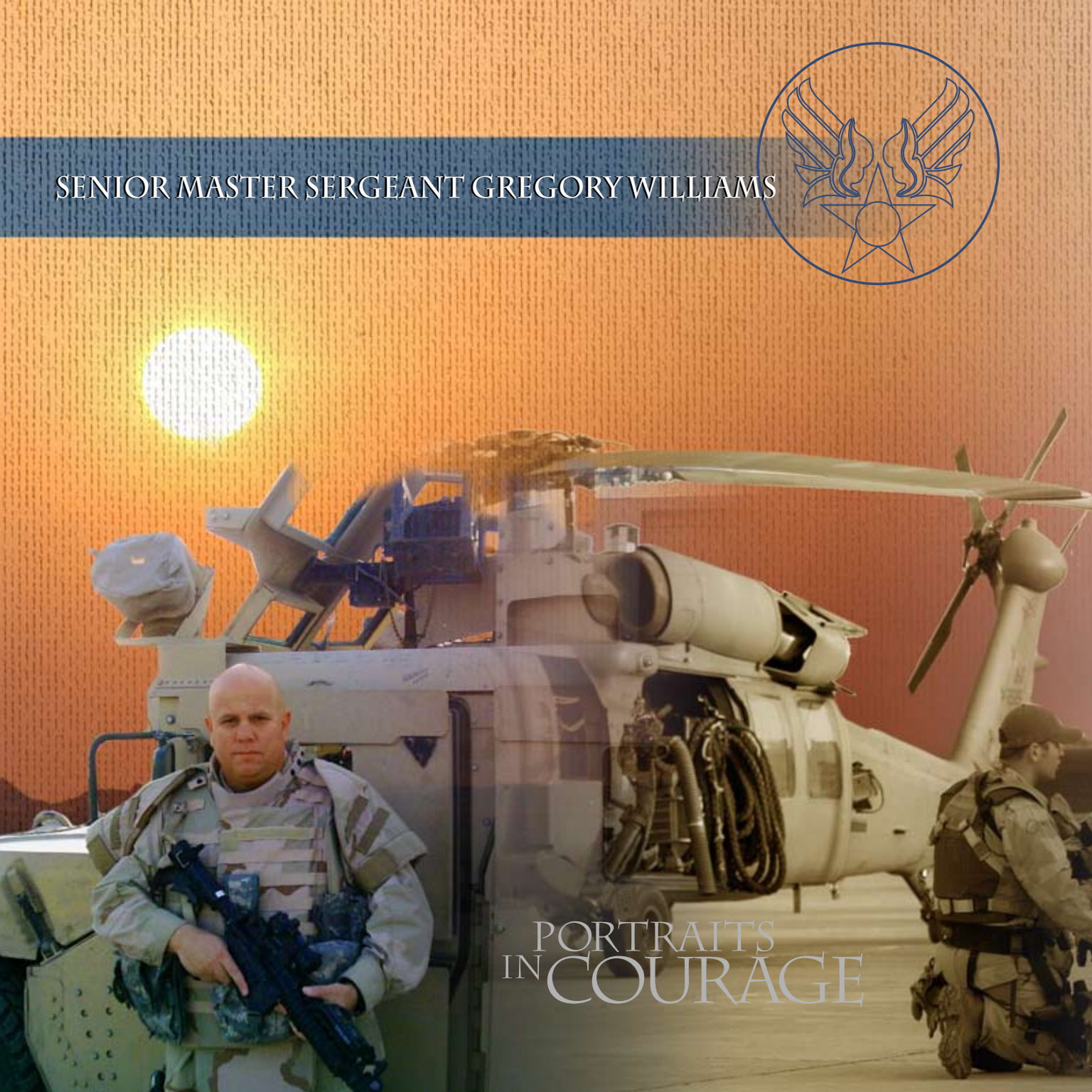
In January 2006, Tech. Sgt. Michelle Barefield once again packed her bags for a six-month combat tour in Iraq, less than a year after she returned home from her last deployment. The 18-year Air Force veteran and mother of two was no stranger to deployments. She had served multiple times in Southwest Asia and the Former Republic of Yugoslavia as an Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) technician. However, this deployment was far from routine. Before it ended, she would survive three separate attacks, take part in a gun battle with insurgents, and take control of a scene after the death of a comrade.

Within days of arriving at Baghdad International Airport, Sergeant Barefield witnessed firsthand the violent death of a team member due to an Improvised Explosive Device (IED). During a check ride with her outgoing team, the U.S. Army Tactical Operations Center requested they clear a road frequented by civilians. With one IED safely destroyed, her counterpart began a sweep for additional threats when a previously undetected device took his life. Without hesitation, Sergeant Barefield rendered aid to another injured team member and took control of the scene. With selfless dedication, she simultaneously organized a sweep for additional hazards, a post blast analysis of the device, and recovery of her fallen comrade's remains. But this was just the beginning of the events Sergeant Barefield would encounter on this deployment.

While enroute to another reported IED, her convoy was targeted. Several vehicles hit IEDs including the one in which Sergeant Barfield was riding. She jumped into action, making sure her teammates were uninjured, initiating area safety measures and helping recover wounded comrades from the burning remains of the other vehicles. This would be the first of three IED attacks her team would survive.

Explosive devices were a reality she dealt with daily, but other threats lurked as well. On yet another day, during what appeared to be a routine IED mission, insurgents attacked the team with small arms fire. Sergeant Barefield did not hesitate. She returned fire while taking cover, allowing her fellow EOD members to return to the safety of the armored vehicle. Sergeant Barefield is a well-respected leader in the EOD career field because of her courage under fire and selfless dedication to the team.

SENIOR MASTER SERGEANT GREGORY WILLIAMS



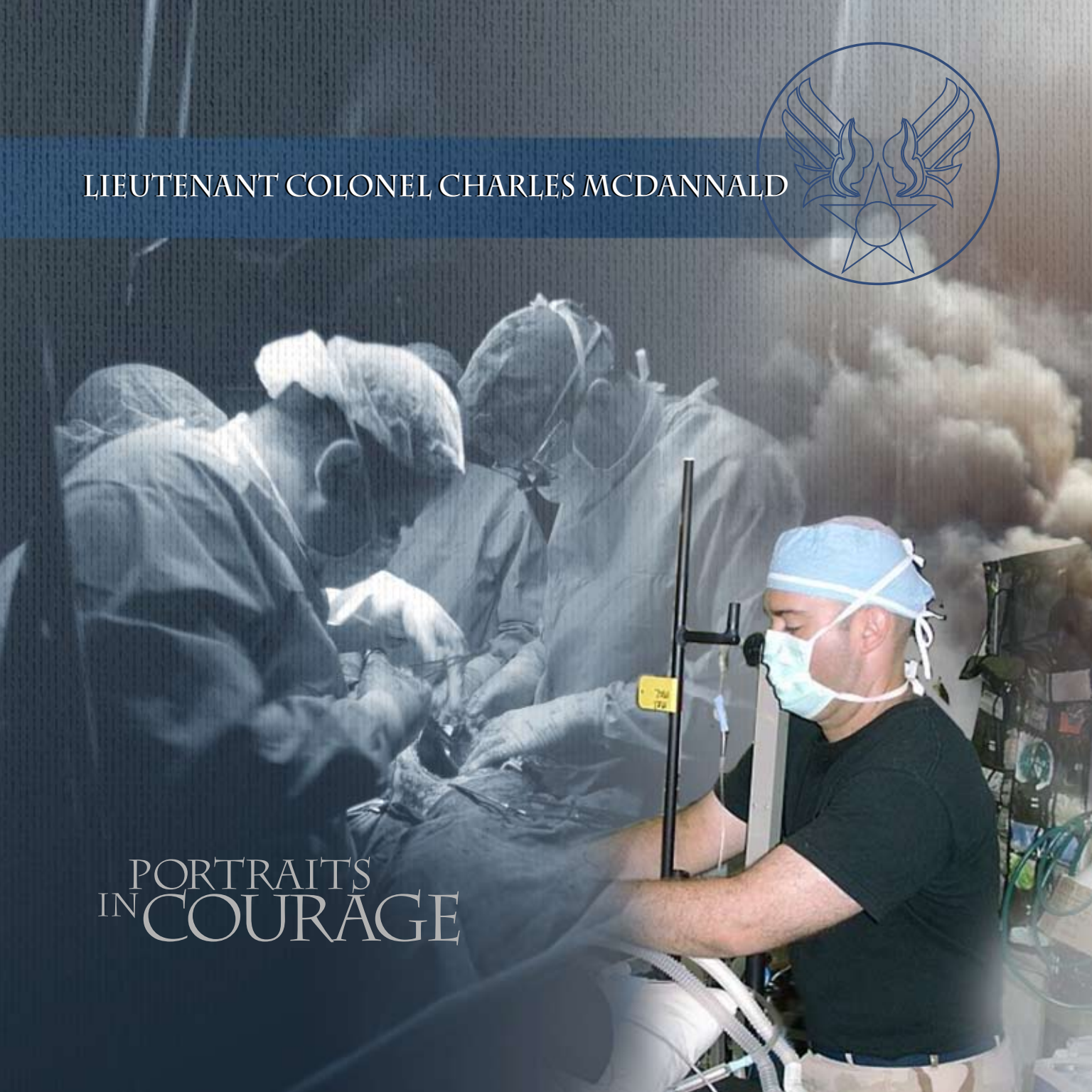
Senior Master Sgt. Gregory Williams is the leader you want at the front of your flight. Whether preparing a unit for the fight through grueling training or taking charge in the midst of a war zone, Sergeant Williams' bold leadership and unwavering focus saved lives during a six-month combat tour in 2005. During his deployment, Sergeant Williams led 113 Security Forces Airmen in defense of Iraq's busiest airfield. His airfield and team would come under more than 85 rocket and mortar attacks during his tour, but none could shake the resolve of this Security Forces veteran.

During one summer attack, Sergeant Williams raced through a 10-round mortar barrage on the installation and compound to aid injured personnel. Their injuries were incapacitating. While mortar fire rained down around him, he administered first aid to two victims until medical help arrived. Sergeant Williams rushed back to the center of attack, where he located two impact points and found a wounded soldier suffering serious internal injuries. Sergeant Williams kept the soldier calm and immobilized to prevent further injury. Medical staff credited him with a life-saving effort. During the hour-long attack, he called in points of impact, checked for impact damage, accounted for personnel and administered first aid. He ran to locations and took charge of situations, providing leadership in a crisis.

The attack did not thwart his continued drive to take the fight to the enemy. During his deployment, Sergeant Williams orchestrated more than 50 combat patrols into hostile territory, resulting in the arrests of 10 insurgents and seizure of hundreds of mortars and thousands of anti-aircraft rounds.

Sergeant Williams' dedication took him back to Iraq on a 365-day tour where he used his combat experience to train and conduct patrols with the Iraqi Police in downtown urban environments. His students can be sure they learned from the one of the best.

LIEUTENANT COLONEL CHARLES MCDANNALD



PORTRAITS IN COURAGE

Lt. Col. Charles McDannald's 20 years of experience as a medical professional were tested while deployed as part of a Special Operations Surgical Team to Ramadi, Iraq, in the Al Anbar Province. The five-person surgical team deployed with special operators where the flow of patients was unending, their wounds life threatening, and the surgical conditions less-than-perfect.

In the 100 days Colonel McDannald spent as the Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist with the special operations team, he was part of 35 major life-saving surgeries, including four that required open heart massage to resuscitate the patient. He performed intense procedures to repair the damage done by roadside explosions, gunfire, suicide bombers and mortar attacks. Every day, the team resuscitated from one to 10 severely wounded people. Some of those were fellow Americans; others coalition partners, even insurgents or the innocent Iraqis caught in the crossfire. All received the skilled care of the dedicated team.

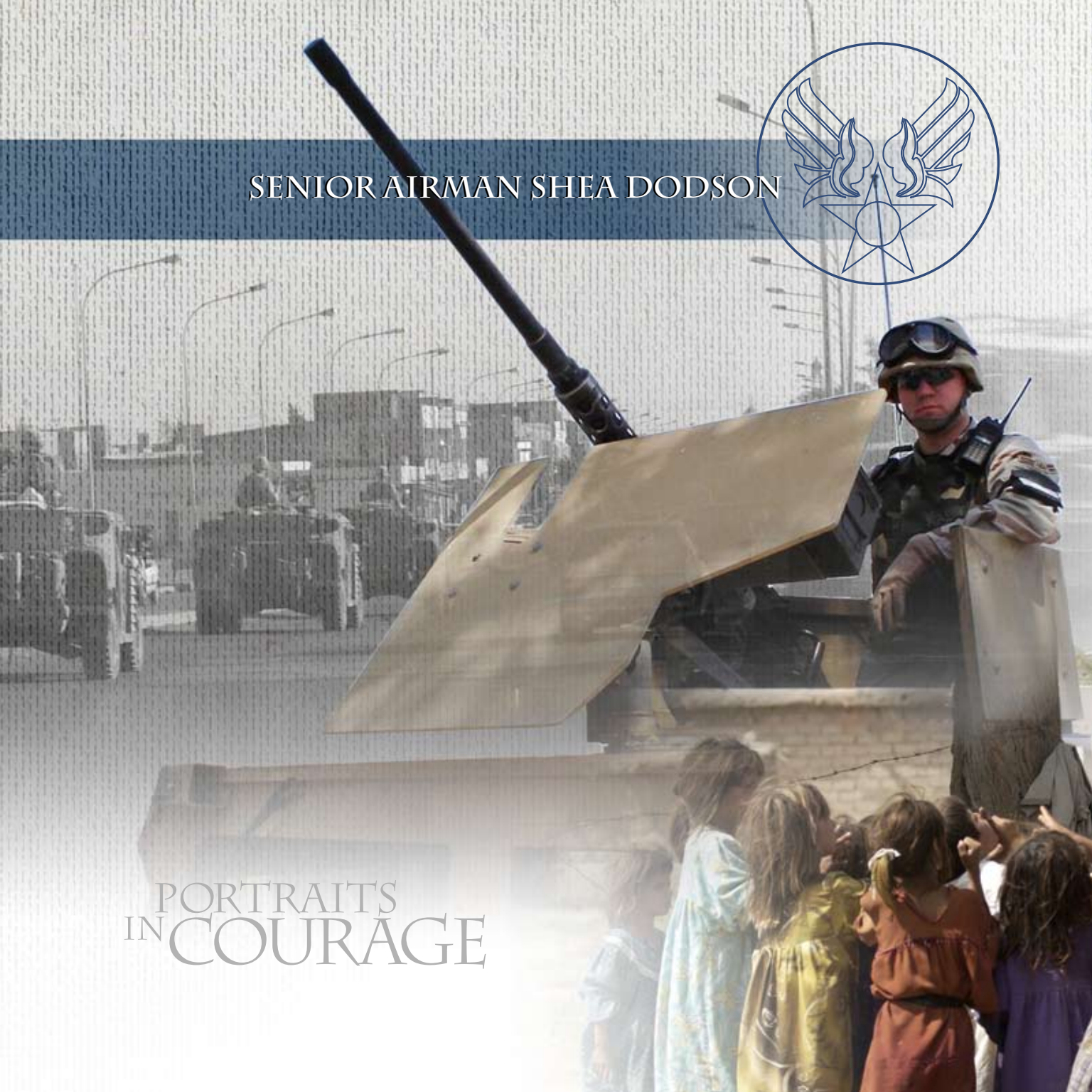
On Sept. 15, 2005, a 120-millemeter rocket struck Colonel McDannald's unit. The blast blew the sleeping quarter's door open of the off-duty members of the surgical team. The rocket killed one U.S. soldier instantly, and wounded three others. One of the three soldiers had an entrance wound to the right collarbone and had diminished breathing sounds. The surgical team sprung into action and determined that he was bleeding into the chest cavity. The wounded soldier went into surgery immediately, and the general surgeon was forced to open the rib cage to get to the source of the bleeding.

Despite the chaos that accompanied the post-attack operations, Colonel McDannald worked furiously administering blood, fluids and drugs to buy the surgeons enough time to stop massive blood loss. The team was determined not to lose the patient.

Shrapnel had lacerated a major vein and the surgeons worked swiftly to repair it. Like so many of the patients Colonel McDannald and the surgical team treated, the patient was stabilized and transported safely for further treatment to the medical center at Balad Air Base, Iraq.

Colonel McDannald is back home now, using his experience to treat patients at Mountain Home AFB, Idaho, but the 100 days he spent in 2005 treating special operations warriors will forever be etched in his heart and mind.

SENIOR AIRMAN SHEA DODSON



PORTRAITS IN COURAGE

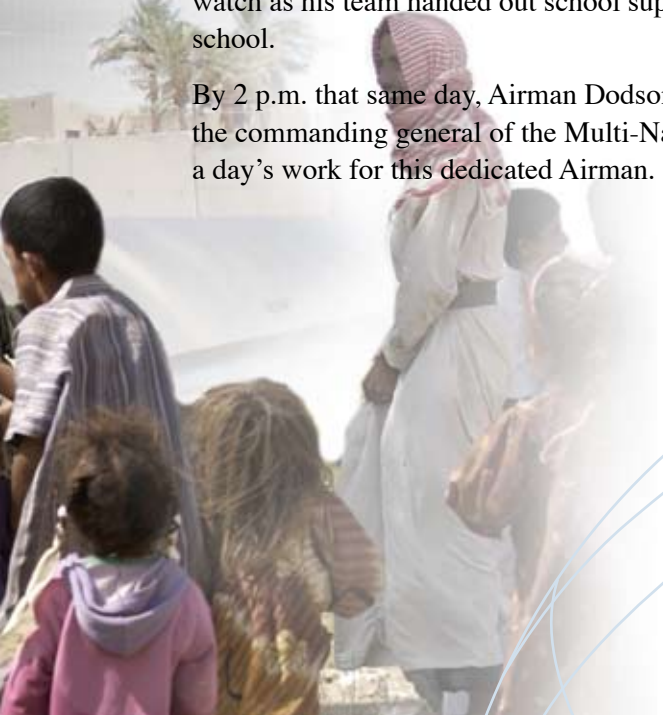
It was summer, 2005, and another hot and sunny day at Phoenix Base in Baghdad. Senior Airman Shea Dodson wanted to do more than his assigned administrative duties inside Baghdad's "Green Zone." The call was out for volunteers to provide security for ongoing convoys, so Airman Dodson raised his hand. After some intense just-in-time training, he was performing security detail for his first convoy.

On his first mission, Airman Dodson put his training to good use. When a suspected vehicle-born suicide bomber raced toward the convoy, he fired .50 caliber rounds into the engine block no fewer than four-times, disabling the vehicle.

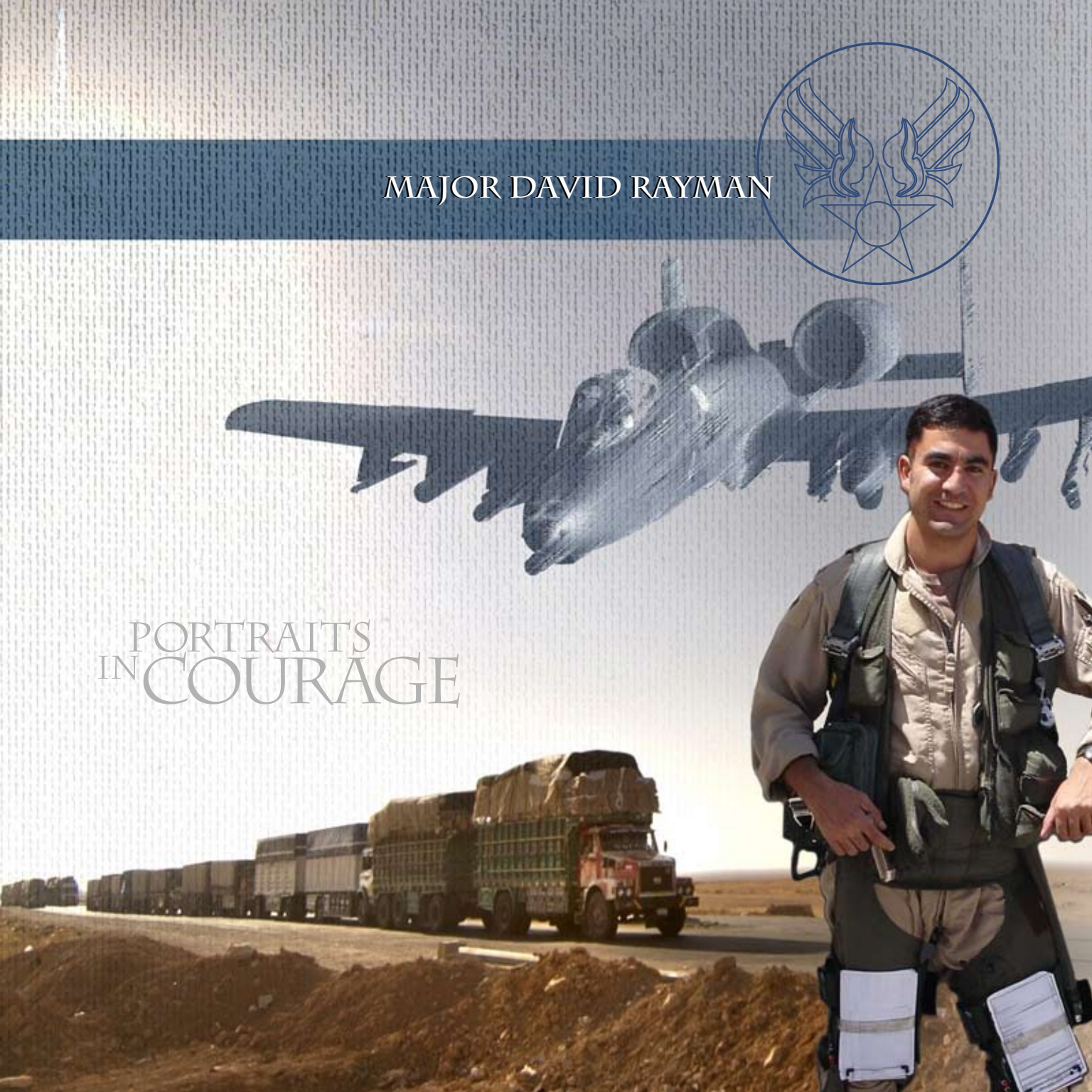
During the same mission, his unit became mired in traffic near a high-rise development. His eagle eyes noticed movement above, and when he looked more carefully, he saw an Iraqi male armed with an AK-47 creeping toward the edge of a balcony overlooking the convoy. Airman Dodson immediately engaged with indirect warning fire from his M-16, hitting the wall next to the suspected insurgent's head. The armed Iraqi dove for cover and never reappeared.

When the convoy arrived at its final destination, a children's school, he continued with a complete security sweep of the perimeter houses to ensure it was clear. Airman Dodson remained on armed watch as his team handed out school supplies to the kids in the open courtyard adjacent to the school.

By 2 p.m. that same day, Airman Dodson was back at his desk, keeping track of critical data for the commanding general of the Multi-National Security Transition Command – Iraq – it was all in a day's work for this dedicated Airman.



MAJOR DAVID RAYMAN



PORTRAITS IN COURAGE

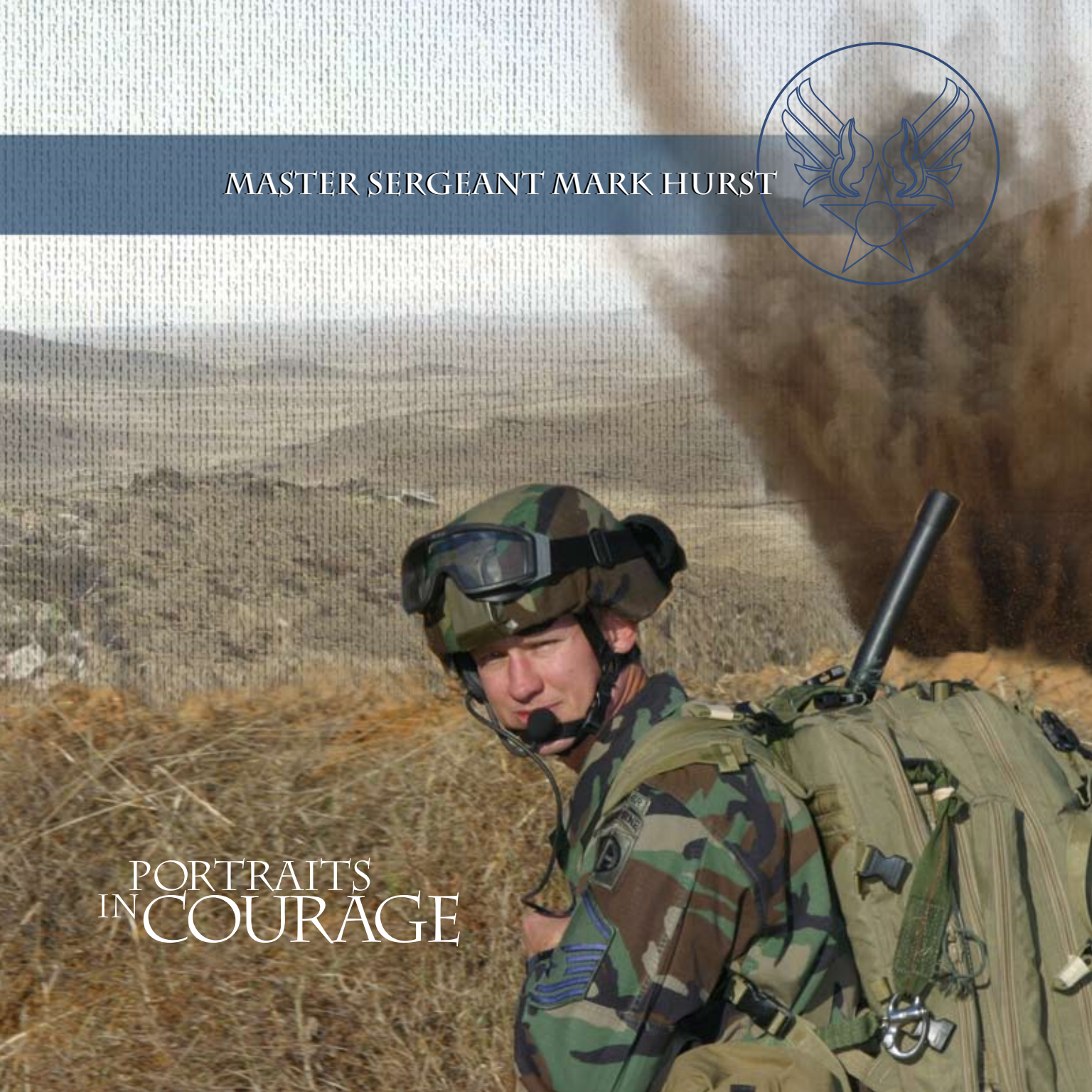
On July 27, 2006, then Capt. David Rayman led a two-ship formation of A-10s in support of a troops-in-contact situation in Central Afghanistan. A Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC) reported a friendly convoy was receiving small arms, rocket-propelled grenade and heavy machine gun fire, and requested immediate close air support.

Heavy haze and dust made it impossible for Captain Rayman to make visual contact with the target area at altitudes above 5,000 feet and distances beyond two miles. He knew he had to get low to be effective. Fully aware of the risks involved, he descended and made a hazardous low-altitude pass to identify the target and force the enemy to break contact. While he was able to locate the target, the enemy was undaunted and continued to press its attack. Captain Rayman would have to employ his weapons to protect the "friendlies" on the ground.

Poor visibility made safe employment of his ordnance extremely complex. To add to his difficulties, his wingman's radio failed and the JTAC was not co-located with the convoy under attack. Despite these challenges, the nine-year Air Force veteran repeatedly employed weapons within 100 meters of the friendly convoy along a three-and-a half kilometer "kill zone." The convoy was able to successfully disengage under the cover of Captain Rayman's gun, rocket and bomb passes, which destroyed the enemy's strongholds. In all, he precisely employed more than 600 30-millimeter rounds, eight rockets, and one MK-82 bomb under very difficult environmental conditions.

When it was over, Captain Rayman had not only killed many insurgents and destroyed the enemy fighting positions; he saved the lives of the coalition convoy members.

MASTER SERGEANT MARK HURST



PORTRAITS IN COURAGE

Master Sgt. Mark Hurst does not take no for an answer. He is a Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) operator who was facing medical discharge from the Air Force after losing his left eye during combat operations in Afghanistan in 2004. As a TACP member, he had more than 100 parachute jumps to his credit, unparalleled training, and passed the ultimate test with combat experience. But the real reason Sergeant Hurst remains in the Air Force today is because of his desire and his heart; not being able to wear his country's uniform was simply unacceptable to the 12-year Air Force veteran.

His injury came during his fifth combat tour in Iraq and Afghanistan. He was serving as a Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC) in Afghanistan, controlling airpower in support of ground forces. On the day he was injured, a rocket-propelled grenade hit his vehicle, leaving him with severe shrapnel wounds to the left side of his face, body and eye. He was treated at the field hospital in Afghanistan and quickly airlifted to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, Germany, and eventually to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington D.C.

Once recovered and fitted with a prosthetic eye, Sergeant Hurst would accept nothing less than being able to contribute to the Air Force and his country. He went to work as the Operations Training Manager and Parachutist Program Manager at Pope AFB, N.C. During this time, he requested a waiver and worked to remain qualified to serve in the combat zone. His waiver was approved and he is now again able to static-line parachute jump. He deployed to Iraq to serve his sixth combat tour from March to July 2006.

Sergeant Hurst's experiences have made him a strong advocate for wounded Airmen. He is often a guest briefer to senior leaders in a variety of courses, sharing his perspective on ways to help wounded Airmen and their families through the difficult recovery period.

Sergeant Hurst serves today because of his devotion to duty, his commitment to the Air Force, and his determination to remain a TACP operator who proudly contributes to his country in uniform.

TECHNICAL SERGEANT COREY CLEWLEY

PORTRAITS IN COURAGE

An Air Force loadmaster found out what it means to be tested under fire while on a special mission in Southwest Asia in 2005. Tech. Sgt. Corey Clewley was loading cargo on his aircraft when he saw a Romanian C-130 come in and make a hard landing. Unbeknownst to the Romanian crew, the aircraft brakes caused a fire, springing Sergeant Clewley into action.

He instructed a fellow loadmaster to inform their aircraft commander of the situation and ensure someone contacted the control tower, while he and a crew chief grabbed fire extinguishers and ran toward the burning aircraft. The Romanian C-130 fire intensified as it spread to the aircraft's fuselage and ruptured the hydraulic brake line. Despite the danger to himself, Sergeant Clewley got within a few feet of the flames and attempted to suppress the fire.

His sense of urgency tripled when he realized the C-130 crew was still inside the aircraft and unable to get out of the burning airplane.

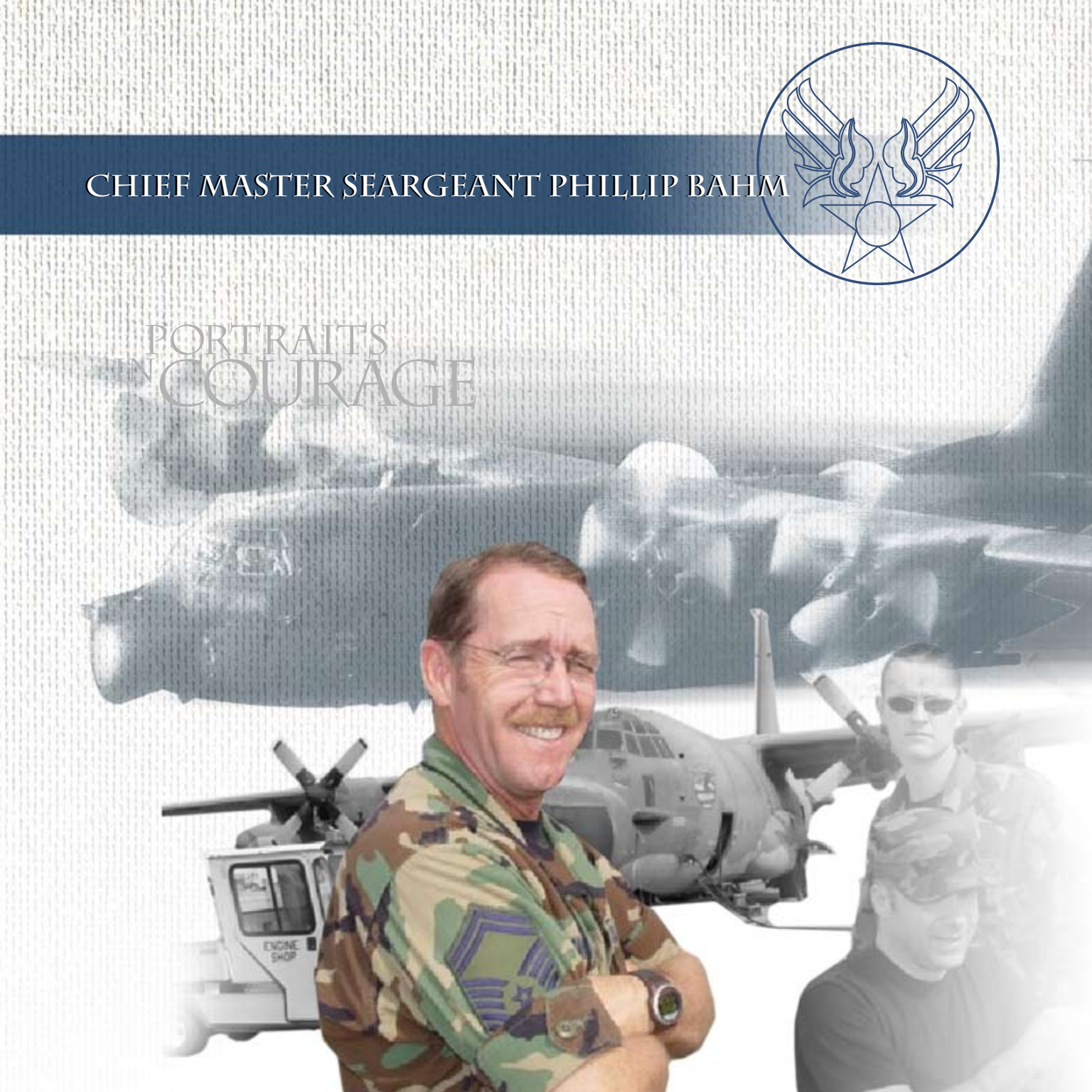
"I saw one of the crew mouthing 'please, please,' and pointing to the troop exit door," said the 15-year Air Force veteran. Sergeant Clewley refocused his attention to that area and began suppressing the fire, enabling the crew to safely exit the aircraft. He continued to keep the fire under control until the fire department arrived.

Sergeant Clewley credits the team effort that kept the incident from becoming a deadly event – from the pilot who relayed the message to the control tower, to the crew chief who went with him and the fire department that responded. Sergeant Clewley never considered the risk to his own life as he worked to save a crew and aircraft that was not part of his responsibility, his service or even his nation.

"To me, in a situation like that, saving the lives of the people on board is more important than who owns the aircraft."

CHIEF MASTER SEARGEANT PHILLIP BAHM

PORTRAITS OF COURAGE



During the height of Operation ANACONDA in Afghanistan, Chief Master Sgt. Phillip Bahm led an aircraft recovery team on a dangerous daylight mission to recover an MC-130E aircraft from a runway close to the battlefield.

The aircraft was mired in mud at an abandoned dirt runway during a high-priority medical evacuation mission the night before. Initial reports indicated the aircraft was beyond recovery and probably destroyed by the enemy.

Chief Bahm was undaunted. Working closely with his team, he devised a plan for extraction, securing all of the equipment they would need to recover the valuable aircraft.

Two British MH-47 helicopters took the team to the abandoned airstrip. Chief Bahm and his team had just three hours to free the aircraft before they were to be picked up at sundown. As the recovery operation began, the first of several enemy mortar attacks also kicked off. Mortars exploded close by on the perimeter of the airfield, and grew steadily closer as the team continued its work.

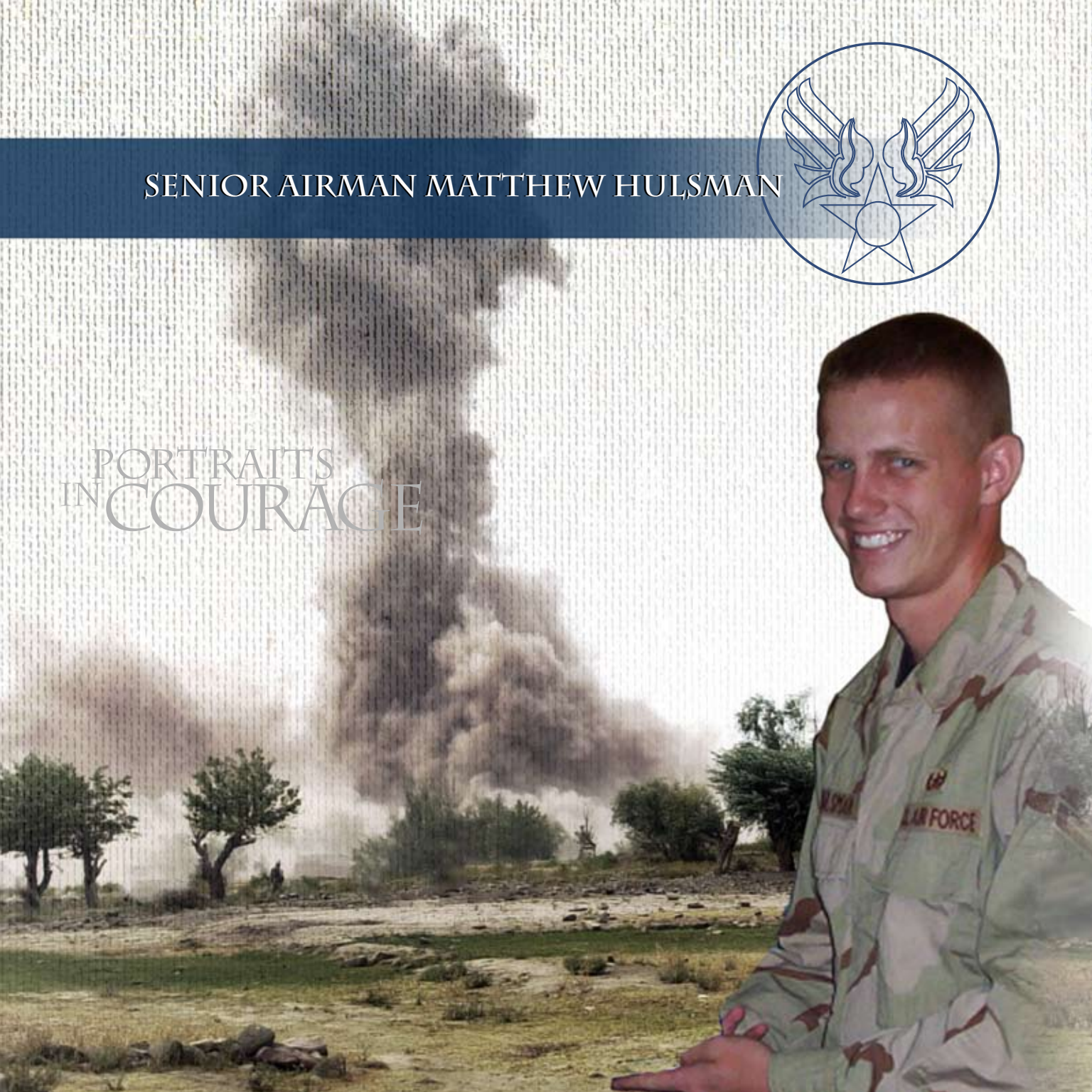
With darkness quickly approaching, Chief Bahm kept his team focused on the task; eventually getting the earth around the aircraft's wheels dug away and shored up. He directed the team to gradually use the dirt to create ramps leading out of the mud, so the aircraft could use its own power to free itself. Chief Bahm's plan proved successful, as the aircraft was able to use close to maximum engine thrust to climb out of the mire and back onto solid ground.

As the MC-130E taxied away from the mud trench, another mortar round detonated less than two kilometers from the airfield. The threat further intensified when large groups of potentially hostile locals gathered at the edge of the airfield, attracted by the sounds of the aircraft's engines. Eventually, after three hours of determined work by the chief and his recovery team, the MC-130E was able to take off and return to Bagram airfield where it dropped off the recovery team and refueled before returning to home station.

Despite the obvious threats to his own life and the lives of his team, Chief Bahm remained poised and determined to perform the recovery of this important national asset, a task that just hours before was deemed impossible.

SENIOR AIRMAN MATTHEW HULSMAN

PORTRAITS IN COURAGE



Though only 21-years-old, Senior Airman Matthew Hulsman, from Elmendorf AFB, Alaska, has seen his share of life in the combat zone. During a six-month deployment to Afghanistan, Airman Hulsman responded to 87 Explosive Ordnance Disposal combat operations, neutralized more than 48,000 pieces of unexploded ordnance, five Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), and two enemy weapons caches, denying insurgents the chance to use more than 25,000 pounds of explosives on coalition forces.

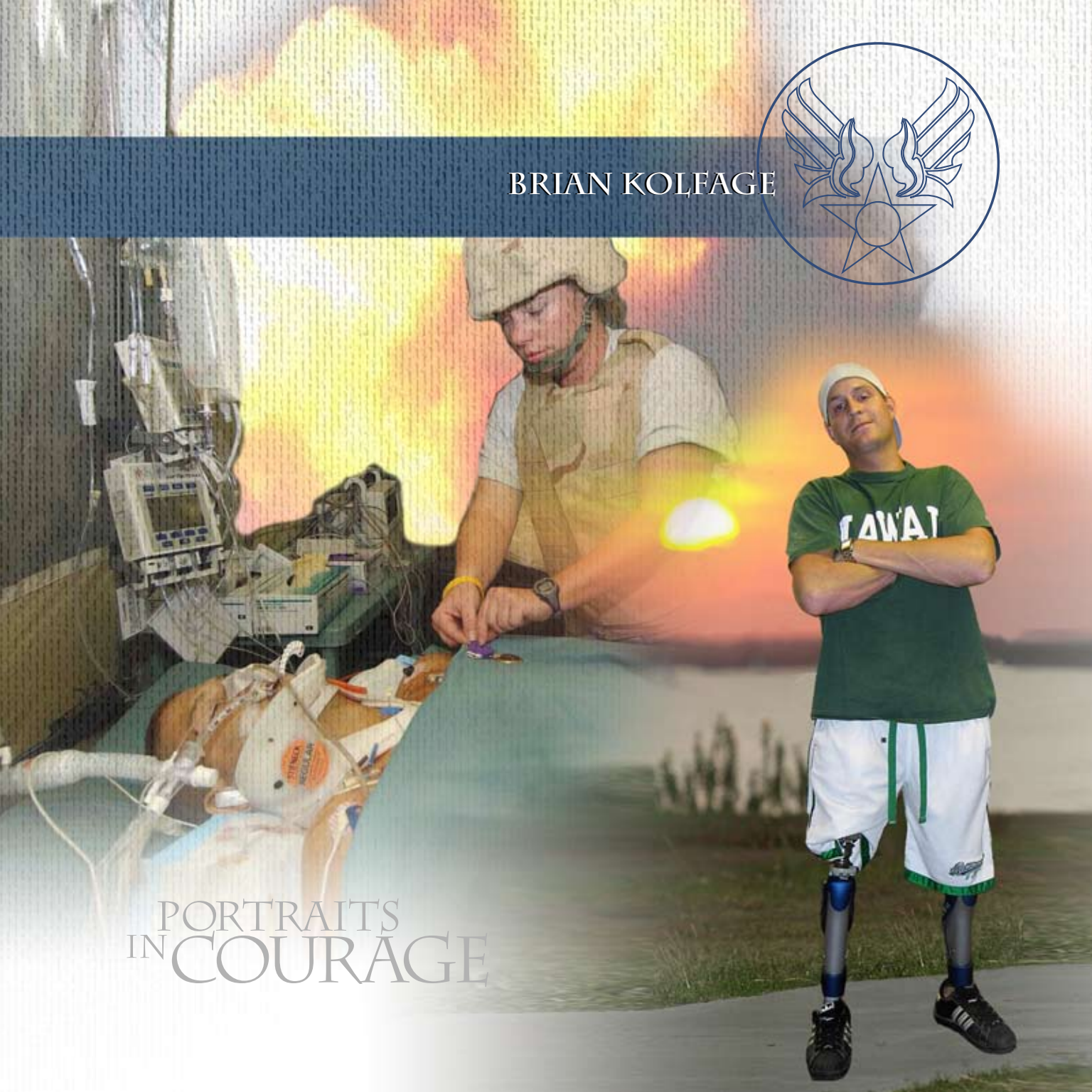
Enough for one deployment? There's more. Airman Hulsman worked with U.S. Army Special Operations Forces and infantry units on 12 combat missions, leading directly to the elimination of 200 Taliban fighters, destruction of an improvised rocket, disposal of over 300 pounds of hazardous munitions, recovery of eight vehicles, and the rescue of 40 people trapped inside a minefield. During these missions, he successfully fought off eight Taliban engagements.

As a convoy driver, he deftly maneuvered his vehicle during multiple day and night fire-fights, including one battle that required him to drive into the kill zone to aid two comrades. His heroism contributed to the safe evacuation of his team members and the elimination of two enemy fighters.

But his work didn't stop when the action did. He also worked diligently after the fight, conducting post blast investigations on three separate vehicles struck by IEDs in a 24-hour period. His thorough analysis identified a new enemy tactic, allowing coalition forces to adjust their own techniques and targeting to deter and prevent further attacks.

Airman Hulsman's actions in his first two years of Air Force service have proven his combat mettle. He is an Airman who has shown unquestionable courage in the midst of great personal danger.

BRIAN KOLFAGE



PORTRAITS IN COURAGE

Brian Kolfage endured a life-changing event that would have sent someone of lesser spirit into a downward spiral. But for this former security forces Airman turned Air Force civilian, life is about looking forward to what you can do, not what you cannot.

Then Senior Airman Kolfage was on his second deployment for Operation IRAQI FREEDOM in 2004. After working a night shift at Balad Air Base, Iraq, he awoke in the afternoon, left his tent to get some water and walked no more than 25 feet when the airbase came under a mortar attack. It would be the last time he would walk on the legs he was born with. A mortar shell exploded about three feet from Airman Kolfage. He was thrown several feet in the air and landed against a wall of sandbags, still conscious, and began calling for help.

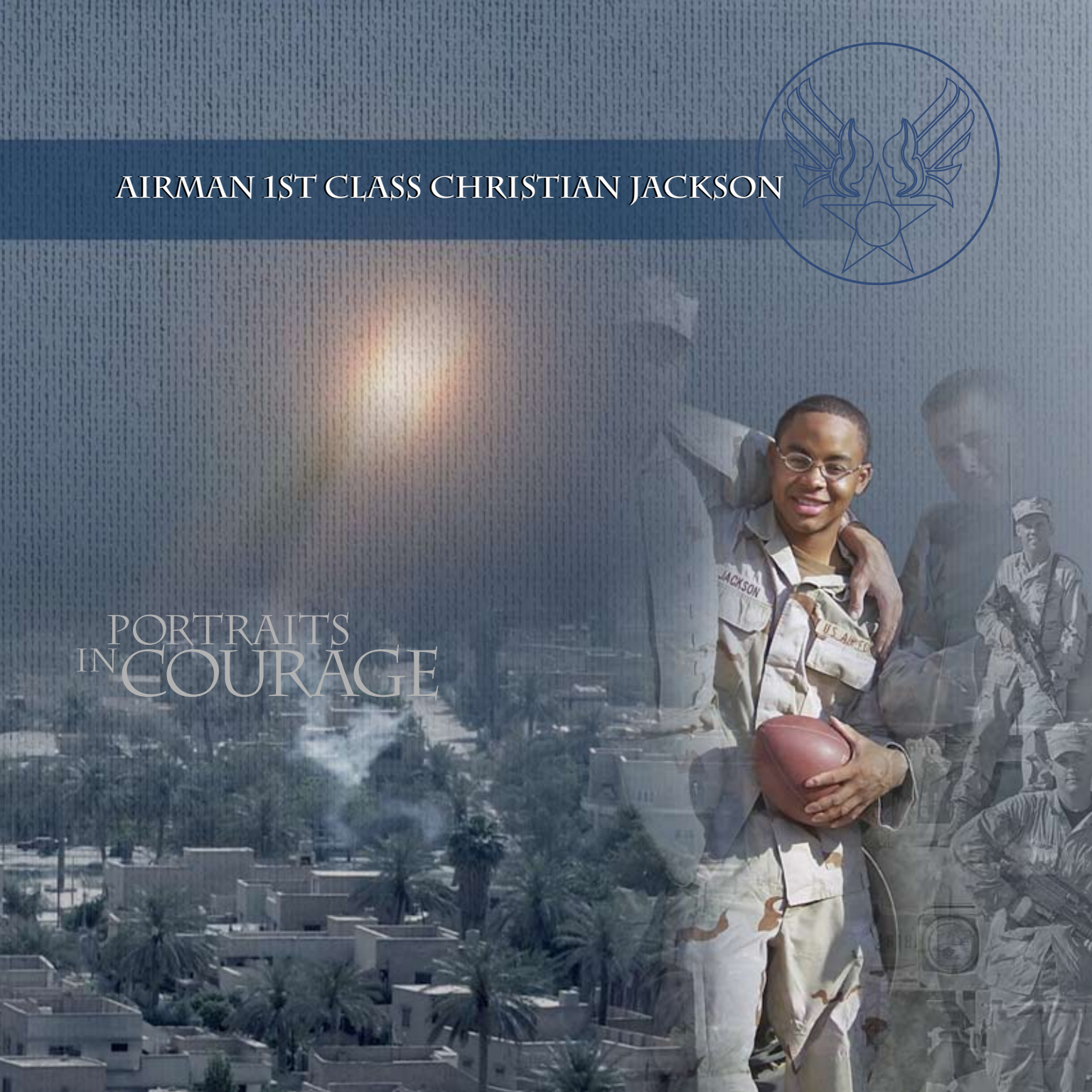
Airman Kolfage's best friend was thrown from his bed during the attack. He heard the screams and rushed outside to find his friend bloody and mangled. The Airman and a medic rushed to help Airman Kolfage, who was struggling to breathe with only one lung after the other had collapsed. Brian's friend desperately tried to divert his attention from the seriousness of his injuries, but calmly, Airman Kolfage assured him that he already knew the extent of his wounds, and that he just wanted to go home to his fiancée, who is his wife today.

An ambulance arrived and rushed him to the Balad Combat Support Hospital. The call for blood was announced over the base speakers, and fellow servicemembers rushed to the hospital by bus, bike or running on foot to give the blood that kept Airman Kolfage alive. Thirty-six hours after being struck by the blast of that mortar, he was airlifted to Walter Reed Medical Center, where his legs and right hand were amputated.

Despite suffering multiple amputations and the looming possibility of death, Airman Kolfage still maintained incredible strength and courage throughout his recovery. The fact that no one with his level of amputation has ever been able to walk independently didn't discourage him. With undiminished spirit, he still saw opportunities and worked with feverish determination through his physical therapy program, gaining strength and balance every day.

Brian is now a civilian employee with the 355th Security Forces Squadron at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz., and continues to embrace a positive attitude as he makes great strides, both literally and figuratively, in learning how to walk with his prosthetics.

AIRMAN 1ST CLASS CHRISTIAN JACKSON



PORTRAITS IN COURAGE

On a cold night in December 2005, Airman 1st Class Christian Jackson's convoy rolled through an Iraqi village carrying supplies to Balad Air Base. The 21-year-old Airman, deployed from Kirtland AFB, N.M., saw a muzzle flash and within moments, the night erupted with gun fire.

Earlier that night, Airman Jackson voluntarily traded his normal driving duties to be the gunner for the second gun truck, responsible for providing firepower and force protection for tractor-trailers hauling cargo. Driving was a fellow Airman, who coincidentally had attended high school with Airman Jackson in New York just a few short years before. Together, they and the other members of the convoy made their way through the village.

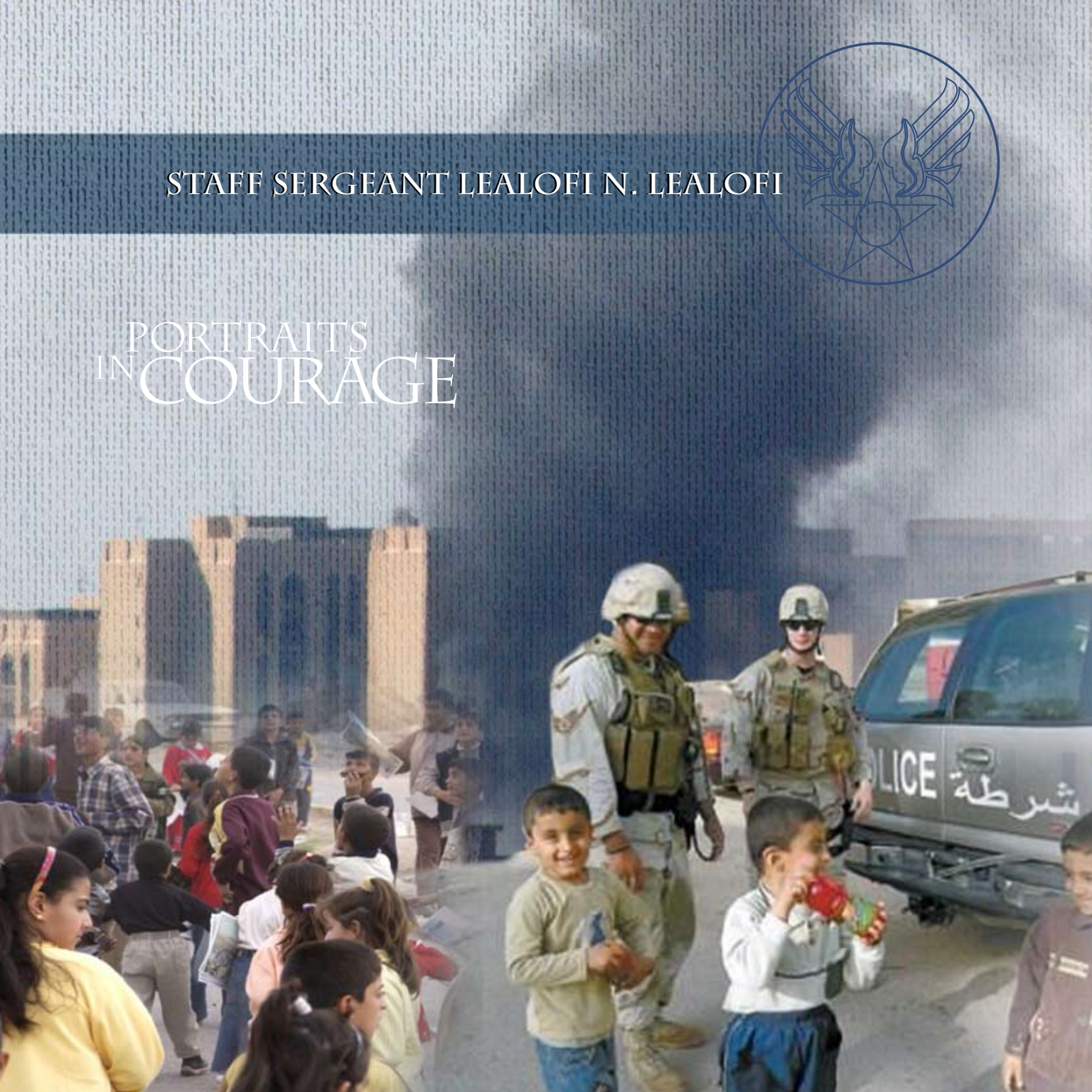
The first element of Airman Jackson's convoy passed underneath an overpass when they were ambushed. Seeing tracer rounds and muzzle flashes to the left, the first truck sent up a red flare to alert the rest of the convoy they were under attack. A white flare followed to illuminate the area.

In response, Airman Jackson turned his turret and, in 40 seconds, unloaded 100 rounds from the .50 caliber weapon despite it jamming twice. When he ran out of ammunition, he used his M-4 rifle firing until the convoy was out of the kill zone. In the light of the following day, there were six confirmed enemy kills.

With only two years in the Air Force, Airman Jackson handled the pressure of the moment like a seasoned veteran. It wasn't until after the incident was over that he realized the intensity of the danger. "At the time, I was just concerned about laying down fire to protect everyone in the convoy," he said. The Airman remains close to many of the convoy members from that night, even though they returned to their separate bases. "The camaraderie there in Iraq was like nothing else."

STAFF SERGEANT LEALOFI N. LEALOFI

PORTRAITS IN COURAGE



February 23rd started out like any other day in 2006 for Staff Sgt. Lealofi N. Lealofi. The sergeant from Vandenberg AFB, Calif., was deployed to Baghdad, Iraq, as a Security Forces member. That particular morning he was performing a typical dismounted community policing patrol in the Al Qadesiyah Apartment Complex. The locals knew the area as the "215 Apartments" because of the tight living quarters and dense population. During his patrol, an excited Iraqi teenager ran up to Sergeant Lealofi and informed him there was a fire in one of the buildings in the 10,000-resident apartment complex.

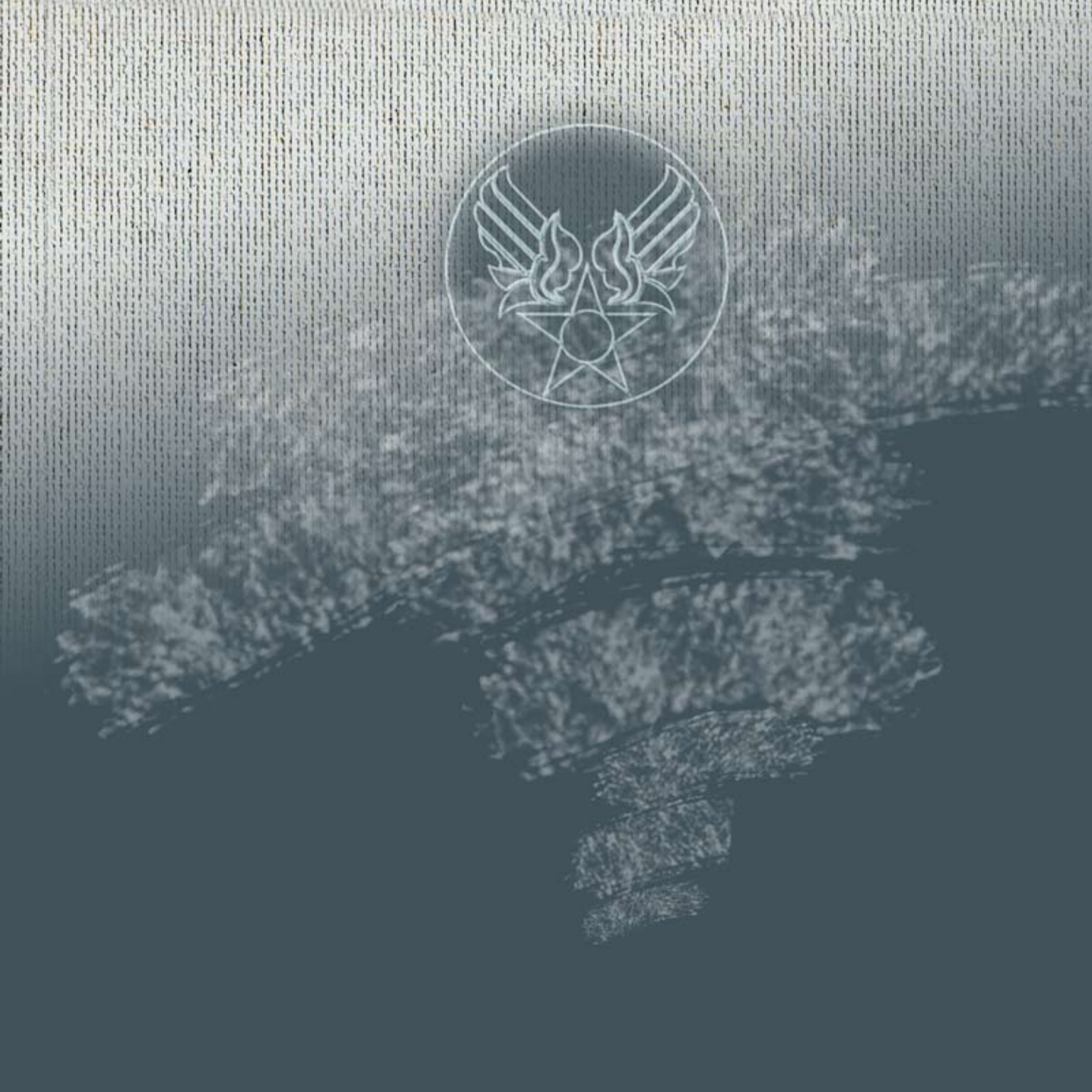
Realizing the building was not equipped with smoke detectors or any type of fire-suppression equipment, Sergeant Lealofi, along with his security forces partner, reacted immediately. As all three ran into the building, Sergeant Lealofi asked the young man to serve as their interpreter to the building occupants. From the outside, they could see the flames and columns of black smoke spewing from the windows on the second floor. Sergeant Lealofi called for the fire department, but knew he had to do something fast. Without hesitation, Sergeant Lealofi, his partner, and the interpreter each disregarded their personal safety and charged into the eight-story, smoke-filled building in an attempt to rescue residents and locate the source of the fire. By the time they reached the third floor, the thick smoke completely obscured their visibility and engulfed them.

In a display of exemplary leadership under pressure, Sergeant Lealofi instructed his security forces partner to return to the first two floors and begin evacuating those tenants. He and the interpreter remained behind and began opening windows, trying to ventilate the stairwell. The smoke refused to yield, and Sergeant Lealofi soon realized that his attempts were futile. With the thick smoke threatening his very life, he knew that he and his interpreter would never reach the third floor. In seconds, he had to come up with a new plan. He realized the fire seemed to be contained on the second floor. The dangerous smoke was rapidly spreading, but the fire was not.

In a bold move, he returned to the ground level and began shouting orders to the upper-floor Iraqi residents. He knew the fire wouldn't reach them but they were actually in more danger as they tried to exit the building. He instructed the residents on the upper floors to close their doors to minimize the smoke's advance and open their windows. He kept the residents in place and as calm as possible until fire and rescue teams arrived.

Once the fire department arrived and gained control over the blaze, Sergeant Lealofi and his partner re-entered the still-smoldering building and safely evacuated the remaining residents from the upper floors. Sergeant Lealofi's courageous act helped save the lives of 50 Iraqi civilians and prevented hundreds more from suffering serious smoke inhalation injuries.

"VICTORY IN THIS WAR DEPENDS ON THE ONE THING THAT HAS NOT CHANGED SINCE THE FOUNDING OF THE AIR FORCE SIX DECADES AGO -- THE COURAGE OF THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO WEAR THE AIR FORCE BLUE."

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

SPEECH AT
THE AIR FORCE MEMORIAL DEDICATION
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