

9.11

10 YEARS LATER

WHY YOU FIGHT

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To those who answered the call

After the United States was attacked Sept. 11, 2001, a special group of Americans stepped forward to answer the call: the men and women of the U.S. armed services. Some enlisted for the first time. Others re-upped.

All made profound sacrifices to help protect their stricken nation.

Why You Fight is about you, your brother, your wife, your friends. It's true, personal stories from Stars and Stripes readers about why they fight in the war on terror.

Submit your own story about why you joined or how you have helped, or share the story of a fallen hero, at stripes.com/whyyoufight.

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GOD BLESS AMERICA & YOU TOO!

The MV Anastasis, a 12,000-ton hospital ship operated by a Christian relief group called Mercy Ships, was loading supplies in Germany on Sept. 11, 2001, in preparation for a mission in Sierra Leone. The ship's captain, Clement Ketchum and his wife, Jennifer, were U.S. Coast Guard veterans who'd been doing relief work in Africa for six years. Their two sons, Will and Benjamin, then 9 and 10, had basically grown up aboard.

Now, on the 10th anniversary of that tragic day, the entire Ketchum family — parents and both sons — is in uniform in the U.S. military.

Jennifer Ketchum is a Coast Guard commander in Monrovia, Liberia, advising the new Liberian National Coast Guard. Clement is now an Army lieutenant colonel working as a foreign area officer specializing in Africa. Both Ketchum sons, Will and Benjamin, are cadets at West Point.

Were it not for 9/11, the Ketchums said, it's unlikely any of them would be wearing a uniform full-time. Along the way family members have served in Afghanistan, Sweden and the U.S., as well as in Africa.

contribute, but he was always looking to fit it in with where the family was now," she recalled. "This was an intense desire to get into the fight and do something. He kept telling me, 'I just want to do something for the effort.'"

Although he'd served 12 years in the Coast Guard and 13 in the Navy Reserve, Clement said the bottom line was that he felt like he had missed out.

"Especially once the war started in Afghanistan and Iraq, and especially as my kids started getting older, I felt like I was born at the wrong time," he said. "I felt like I had served and I had missed something that I really wanted to do."

As Jennifer's mobilization ended, the Ketchum family relocated to Florida in 2007, where Jennifer had a civilian job lined up. Almost simultaneously, Clement volunteered to be

In the meantime, the Ketchums' kids had grown up. Their elder son, Benjamin, enlisted in the Coast Guard Reserve and was later accepted to West Point through the Soldier Admission Program — the first Coast Guardsman ever to be accepted into the program, academy officials said.

The bigger surprise was that the younger Ketchum son, Will, decided to apply as well.

"He'd always said, 'Yeah, the military is OK for you three, but I'm not going to do it,'" Jennifer recalled. "We took him to the older one's acceptance parade in August [2009]. He was hot and sweating and not having a good day. But when we got back to Miami, I saw him on the computer. 'What you doing?' 'Nothing.'"

It turned out he was applying to West Point. Benjamin is a member of the academy's class of 2013; Will is in the class of 2014.

Independently, the Ketchums say, Jennifer learned about the chance to volunteer to be called up once again, and to help the government of Liberia to stand up its new national coast guard.

"This is my dream job," Jennifer said. "We got co-located without even trying."

"Two independent services doing different processes coming to the same location," Clement said. "I was perfectly fine doing an unaccompanied tour, and I think if we had tried it wouldn't have worked."

While it can be a challenge getting their family together given the four military careers and nearly 4,500 miles that separates the Ketchums, the parents say they're making it work. The family has a condominium in Falls Church, Va., that serves as home base.

"Today, I look in the mirror and I'm wearing a U.S. Army uniform and I'm actually used to it," Clement said. "I'm getting ready for my 50th birthday, and it's completely beyond anything I would have imagined 10 years ago. I'm very happy."

"It's really great," Jennifer said. "I was home with the boys when they were home from West Point, and



'The catalyst for action was 9/11'

By BILL MURPHY JR. | Stars and Stripes

In the weeks and months after 9/11, the U.S. Coast Guard started mobilizing reservists, and Jennifer Ketchum learned she would likely be called up. She decided to volunteer for an assignment she thought she'd really enjoy — teaching as the Coast Guard's contribution to the faculty of a United Nations maritime school in Sweden.

The Ketchum family left the Anastasis after she landed the job.

"I followed Jennifer," Clement recalled. Her tour was extended repeatedly.

The whole time, however, Jennifer said she could see her husband wanted to be involved himself.

"He really wanted to go, wanted to

mobilized as a Navy Reserve officer in Afghanistan.

At age 46, he went on a six-week weight-loss program to get back into mobilization shape, but when he reached Afghanistan, the job he thought he'd be doing — "teaching logistics or something" — wasn't really needed anymore.

"But they needed civil affairs officers to support teams downrange," Clement said, and so he volunteered for that.

"It was more of a combat role than I'd expected, but given all the experience I'd had on Mercy Ships, it was pretty similar. I didn't get IED'd, but the vehicles in the convoy I was in did," Clement said.

"I really liked the campus. It was just a really nice place," Will said. "But I was also into the mind-set. ... It seemed this was different from other colleges. Everyone is motivated here to do more than just party and get through."

Both Jennifer and Clement also had more chapters left in their military careers.

First, Clement decided he wanted to go back on active duty full-time. It was a long and involved process, but he applied and was accepted for an interservice transfer to the Army. As some of his friends from the Coast Guard Academy were retiring, he started a new role, as an Army foreign area officer in Liberia.

they were exchanging insignia. 'Hey, do you have another nape tape with the name "Ketchum" on it?'"

Jennifer said she's cognizant that while all four are happy to have military careers, it likely never would have happened if it weren't for the terrorist attacks.

"For Clem, it was 9/11 directly. For me it was the same as well," she said. "I think the boys saw our commitment, too, and said, 'Well, we'd like to be a part of that as well.' ... The catalyst for action was 9/11."

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Background photo by Chuck Kennedy/MCT
Inset photos courtesy of Clement Ketchum



Stephen Kraft walked up the steps of the subway and over to Times Square right as live footage on the Jumbotron showed the second plane crashing into the twin towers.

He had been stuck on the E train from Queens for 35 minutes, told only that there was “police activity” at the World Trade Center, and now in the mad crush of panicked people, he was still unsure of what, exactly, had happened.

“Surreal is a good way to put it,” Kraft said. “I just didn’t know what to think.”

People were flooding out of the MTV building where he worked as a benefits administrator in the human

resources department. Kraft wanted to get out of Times Square — a chaotic sea of people on even a normal day — and started walking toward the East Side. He tried calling his family, but it was impossible to get through to anyone. He stopped at a hole-in-the-wall bar in Midtown Manhattan, the kind where people go to drink at 9 in the morning. With all eyes turned to the news on the TV, he learned that two planes had hit the towers in a terrorist attack. He thought of his sister-in-law, who worked there.

talion, 82nd Airborne Division. He was older than the typical private. “I’d graduated from college, been to work, so I brought certain experiences to the table,” he said.

Two years after joining, he fought as part of Task Force Falcon in the drive to take Baghdad during the Iraq invasion. His unit followed behind 3rd Infantry Division and the armored “Thunder Runs” to take the capital city in April 2003.

The unit battled in the heavily fortified city of Samawah, from which the Iraqi Republican Guard and other fighters were attacking American supply lines. For clearing the city, Kraft said the 82nd’s 2nd Brigade earned the Presidential Unit Citation, the highest unit award for valor in the U.S. military.

‘We were at war. I wanted to do my part’

BY MEGAN McCLOSKEY | Stars and Stripes

The phone lines had been jammed since he got off the train, but when he finally got through to his mom and learned his family was OK, he told her he was joining the Army. “We were at war,” he said about his immediate decision to enlist. “I wanted to do my part.” Three weeks later, at age 28, he was a soldier.

Kraft’s older brother, an Army veteran, had gone with him to the recruiter in his hometown of Bay Shore, N.Y. When Kraft first told his mom his plans to enlist, she responded, “Stephen, don’t do anything stupid,” but she and the rest of his family were ultimately supportive of his desire to serve.

He signed up to be a combat engineer. He wanted to be on the front lines and wavered between engineer and infantryman, but decided it would be “more fun to work with demolitions.”

His friends threw him a huge going-away bash, and he headed off to basic training.

He was stationed at Fort Bragg, N.C., with the 307th Engineer Battalion, 82nd Airborne Division. He was older than the typical private. “I’d graduated from college, been to work, so I brought certain experiences to the table,” he said.



Stephen Kraft, right

During one mission, his unit came upon a junkyard filled with abandoned Russian tanks that were inoperable but loaded with highly explosive tank rounds, which could be pilfered to create improvised explosive devices. So his unit went about destroying the tanks and “got pretty creative” in doing so, Kraft said. He has a picture of himself and good friend standing in front of a flaming tank.

“The funny part came about 20 seconds later when it started cooking off rounds and we went running,” he said.

By the time Kraft was fighting in the Iraq War, his service was “less about 9/11 and more about just doing my job as a soldier,” he said.

Kraft got out as a specialist after his three-year enlistment was up, and he wonders whether he should have pursued a career in the Army.

“That’s the only question on the table: coulda, shoulda, woulda,” he said.

His age played a factor in his decision to return to civilian life in Brooklyn.

The Army is “a young man’s game,” he said.

But he is still connected to the military, helping veterans find employment through his job at the Wounded Warrior Project in New York City.

“I really love the mission. I feel like I can make a difference,” Kraft said. “I like being part of this organization to just give back to my fellow veterans.”

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Background photo by Chuck Kennedy/MCT
Inset photo courtesy of Stephen Kraft



9.11

Cradling his newborn son in a New Mexico hospital room, 25-year-old Joshua Hernandez was buzzing with the elation of becoming a father.

Then a nurse walked in and told him and his wife that they should turn on the TV. Hernandez held tight to his baby as he watched the second airplane collide into the twin towers, and his personal happiness gave way.

He remembers the shock. The helplessness. The anger.

And the fierce protectiveness he felt for his young family.

"From there, it grew and grew," Hernandez said. "It was just something inside me, and holding my son, I knew I had to do something."

As the details of what happened unfolded and al-Qaida became a

troops.

"We had eight KIAs on that day," Hernandez said.

After the deployment ended, Hernandez had about a year and half at home before deploying again to Iraq in October 2006.

About nine months into his second deployment, this time with 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, Hernandez was on a dismounted patrol, and he walked over an improvised explosive device. The blast threw him, badly rattling his whole body, but the area wasn't secure enough for a helicopter to pick him up. When they got back to base, he was treated by a medic for a back injury and a concussion, and was given the option to go home.

His unit was already shorthanded, and he often filled in as platoon sergeant when needed, so Hernandez

'I wanted to be up front, leading the way'

BY MEGAN MCCLOSKEY | Stars and Stripes

household name, Hernandez was "like the rest of America: glued to the news." He was restless, needing to take action. At the time, he was a manager at a fitness club, and one of the members was an Army recruiter who talked to him about enlisting.

"I could do that," he remembers thinking. "I can at least go out and defend my country and do something honorable as a father. Show my son something good."

In January 2002, he signed up for the infantry. He wanted to take a gun to the front lines and avenge what had happened to his country.

"I didn't want to be in the background cheering people on," he said. "I wanted to be up front, leading the way."

His wife, Michelle, and his family were nervous about his new career choice, but they supported his decision.

"I couldn't talk about anything else" after 9/11 happened, he said.

On the first anniversary of the terrorist attacks, Hernandez was in boot camp.

Hernandez, Michelle and 1-year-old Sebastian moved to Fort Hood, Texas, where he would spend his entire military career.

He deployed to Iraq in 2004 for a 15-month tour with 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment in Sadr City on the outskirts of Baghdad. His unit was there in April when cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and his Shiite militia declared holy war on American

troops. Instead, he spent two weeks on bed rest, and then worked through the pain for the next six months of the deployment with medication and steroid shots.

"I sucked it up and drove on," he said.

But when he got back to Texas, the choice to stay in the military was no longer his. He had to have surgery on his back to fix two spinal fractures, and the doctor said carrying any large amount weight could paralyze him. Hernandez, a staff sergeant, was medically retired in 2009 with 100 percent disability for his back, traumatic brain injury and hearing loss.

"I would love to have continued serving," he said. "There's nothing better I could be doing."

By the time he retired, he had had a second son, Alexander. Now awaiting the birth of his daughter, he's working on his teaching degree at a school near Fort Hood with the goal of becoming a basketball coach. He said he likes the idea of spending all day in a gym, but he's disappointed he couldn't continue in the Army as he had planned. His eldest son, Sebastian, old enough to have heard the story of 9/11, had thought of him as Rambo.

"I did what I did for love of my country," Hernandez said. "Even knowing I'd be injured, I'd do it over again. No questions asked."

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Background photo by Laurence Kesterson, Philadelphia Inquirer/MCT
Inset photo courtesy of Joshua Hernandez

WHY YOU FIGHT

On the day the twin towers crashed down and a pall of smoke rose above the Pentagon, Mathew Niblack, a Vietnam-era Navy veteran and former National Guardsman, knew the attacks meant war.

"I remember the pictures of the burning buildings and the people falling," said Niblack, of Salem, Ore. "That's an image I can't get out of my head."

Niblack, then in his early 50s, assumed the conflict would be waged by younger men.

body would handle the pounding now.

"I knew I couldn't do it without collapsing after half a mile," he said.

Instead, beginning in March 2004, he cut back on food, eating only fruit and salads during the day and nothing after 6 p.m. And he started walking.

"First I'd have the bus drop me off a mile and a half from home," he said. "Before long I was up to five and seven miles a day," he said.

As his strength and energy increased, he began jogging, and the weight melted off. By September

who'd been killed.

"We would track reports from the FOBs where battles were happening, and we would try to anticipate where soldiers would be injured or killed," he said. "We'd scrub [reports] to make sure they were free of errors, had the correct wording, made sense. Then we'd send them up the chain of command."

It was a race against the clock, and against civilian journalists, said Purdy, who also served in the 41st PSC.

"We had to turn them around quickly," he said. "Journalists were embedded with a lot of these units

troops he'd encountered only in death reports.

"I think he felt a lot of guilt he wasn't up there where the action was," Purdy said. "If he'd had a chance to go forward with the guys up there, he would have."

As Niblack's stress symptoms mounted, he said he began making frequent, uncharacteristic mistakes in his vocational training work.

"I knew what policy I was supposed to follow and I would just do something different," he said. "I would make completely dumb mistakes."

He was later diagnosed with PTSD

'I realized I needed to be doing more'

By CHRIS CARROLL | Stars and Stripes

He didn't know it yet, but the tragic events of 9/11 would bring about momentous shifts in his own life and set in motion a personal tale of loss. Some of the changes in the coming years would be welcome, but others would be wrenching testimony to the unexpected costs of war.

In the years after the attacks, Niblack worked as a vocational trainer with the Oregon State Employment Division. As he watched the rising tides of conflict in faraway Afghanistan and then in Iraq, his thoughts were often with the Oregon National Guard troops increasingly being sent to war.

In January 2004, Niblack went to the local National Guard recruitment office to rejoin. He harbored no fantasies of combat glory. At his age, he doubted he'd even be sent overseas. But with his experience of years working in state government, Niblack thought he could be of some use.

"I just wanted to do something to support those young people," he said.

The years, however, had left him with more than just professional experience. The recruiter's scale showed Niblack, at 5-foot-11, had ballooned to more than 250 pounds.

"I was obese, with the beer belly sticking out," he said. "I didn't have any energy. I was a couch potato."

An age waiver for the then 53-year-old Niblack to re-enlist was possible, but there was no such thing as a beer belly waiver. The recruiter told Niblack to try again after he'd lost nearly 60 pounds.

Niblack had once enjoyed running, but doubted his overweight

2004, he successfully weighed in and later passed the required physical. Soon, an age waiver was approved and Niblack re-entered the Oregon Army National Guard as a sergeant.

"Age was never an issue for him physically," said Staff Sgt. Barry Purdy, an active-duty member of the Oregon Guard who served with Niblack. "He smoked a lot of people on the PT test. He smoked me, and I'm only 43."

In early 2004, Niblack attended an event featuring young members of the Oregon Guard wounded in Iraq. He realized he wasn't yet satisfied with his level of involvement in the growing wars.

"I realized I needed to be doing more," he said.

Niblack asked to be sent to the war zone. He was assigned to the 41st Personnel Services Company, where his skills working as a civil servant could be of use. In mid-2005, he was sent to Kuwait for a 14-month deployment as a casualty operations technician, preparing reports when soldiers or civilians are wounded or killed in combat.

For the first time, Niblack was separated from his family — three children, four grandchildren and his wife of 34 years. He told an Oregon newspaper at the time that "this is the longest we have ever been separated. Sometimes I yearn to be home with her as she faces some of the difficulties around the house."

For the first six months, Niblack prepared reports on injured troops. Then he switched to reports on those

taking casualties, and we had to move reports quickly to give the Army time to notify the family before they heard about it on the news."

Niblack returned to Oregon in late 2006, resuming his family and job responsibilities. The euphoria of being home was soon replaced by unwanted memories.

"In 2008 and 2009, we started losing more soldiers in Afghanistan," he said. "And then all these memories started coming back [that] I couldn't stop."

Unlike many soldiers with post-traumatic stress symptoms who struggle reliving wartime experience, Niblack didn't have firsthand memories of death and violence. Instead, the longtime civil servant was reliving what seemed like bureaucratic nightmare suffused with horror. One recurring dream was of an actual case in which a soldier burned to death after his Humvee was hit by an improvised explosive device.

"Later the Department of the Army called me up and told me they wanted to know what kind of helmet he had on," Niblack said. "What sense does that make? He burned alive. I called his unit to find out and they thought it was completely stupid."

"I don't know why, but it's something that just sticks with me."

Purdy said that during the 41st PSC's deployment Niblack — who had become a father figure to younger soldiers in the unit — sometimes identified too closely with dead



and major depression at a local VA facility, he said. In July, after years of trying to pull his life back together, he was discharged from his state job.

"I just couldn't do it anymore," he said. "I couldn't function, couldn't analyze information like I used to."

Even worse, his extended absence followed by PTSD and depression have ripped apart his home life, Niblack said. He and his wife of four decades are in the midst of a divorce.

That he would arrive at such a point was inconceivable when he re-enlisted, he said.

"I consider myself a Godly man who keeps with the Book," he said. "I thought with my age and experience, I could handle almost anything. Well, I was wrong."

Niblack, 61, is still a member of the Oregon National Guard, and said today the military is his lifeline.

"My chain of command is doing everything they can to get me a medical extension and keep me in another year," he said.

That would make it simpler to get the psychological treatment he needs, as well as keep him surrounded by his most effective support group — the men and women he served with in Kuwait.

For all that's happened, he doesn't regret his late-life choice to return to military service after 9/11.

"If they'd let me, I'd go back overseas right now," he said. "I'd take someone else's place."

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Background photo by Chuck Kennedy/MCT
Inset photo courtesy of Mathew Niblack



Ten years after Zachariah Chitwood pledged to join the Army and avenge America, he insists he has no regrets.

That's in spite of a roadside bomb in 2005 that compressed discs in his spine and threw his hip joints out of place. After countless electroshock muscle treatments that only blunt his constant pain. After a six-year struggle with mild traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder cost him a marriage and nearly cost him custody of his son.

Still, he insists, "I'd do it all again if I had the

wanted to go back out [on the next mission]," he said. "When I came home a few months later, I was still having severe back pain and still having problems with my hearing."

For years after returning home in 2006, Chitwood ignored his physical and mental pain, writing it off as wear and tear from time spent overseas.

Friends and family saw a difference in him. His speech and thought were slowed. He complained about frequent nightmares.

He tried and failed at college five times. He got married and divorced within a few years. Chitwood said the relationship ended in part because

It was a taboo, almost. If you talked about it, you were going to get it. It took a lot for me to realize I just wasn't right."

Chitwood recently finished a two-week inpatient treatment program for his PTSD and is on a long list of medications for his back pain. But he said he's grateful for where he is today, because without any treatment his condition would have only worsened.

"You may never be the same person you were, but you can make progress toward that," he said.

Chitwood also believes that his therapy was crucial in gaining joint custody of his son, Caden. The

'I'd do it all again if I had the chance'

By LEO SHANE III | Stars and Stripes

chance."

No regrets, but there is guilt for the 27-year-old National Guardsman. He believes he should have been serving alongside two friends killed in Iraq in 2007, even though his injuries wouldn't allow it.

He worries about two of his brothers in Afghanistan, both of whom joined the Guard to "keep me safe," but in the end deployed without him.

"If it wasn't for me, my brothers wouldn't be over there right now," he said. "It's not so much that I want to be overseas, but I have [battlefield] knowledge that they don't. You don't leave a man behind."

"But right now, I'm not in the right state of mind."

Chitwood is one of more than 45,000 U.S. servicemembers wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan, many within just a few years of leaving high school. An Oregon native who was a junior in high school on Sept. 11, 2001, he admits that he barely thought about getting injured when he enlisted.

"I told [my mother], 'This is our Pearl Harbor. This is the worst attack of our generation. And somebody has to step up and do something,'" he said.

Within 18 months after joining the Army, Chitwood was in Iraq. A few months later, during a routine patrol, the Humvee in front of his was destroyed by a roadside bomb. Everyone survived, but the blast wave injured troops several vehicles away.

"I told them my back hurt, I couldn't hear anything out of my left ear. But I said I was good, I



of his anger and impatience.

He was living for months on his older brother's couch before his family pushed him into treatment. Only then was he formally diagnosed with mild traumatic brain injury and PTSD.

"You feel selfish even claiming that title of 'disabled veteran' because there are so many guys out there much worse off than I am," he said. "But some scars are physical, some are mental."

"Nobody ever wants to say, 'Yeah, I have PTSD.'"

3-year-old plays with his father's uniform top and asks if Dad is an "Army man."

Chitwood knows one day he'll have to explain much more about his service and injuries.

"The biggest thing I want him to know is that [service] is something you can be proud of, no matter what anyone tells you, no matter what happens," he said.

"But as far as my experiences? It scares me to death to think about sitting down and talking to him. I don't like to talk to people about it. If people knew what I did, they'd look differently at me."

Today, Chitwood lives with his girlfriend, a fellow Iraq War veteran, near his hometown in Oregon. He said he sees his family frequently, and is helping to watch over four nieces and nephews while his brothers are deployed.

Progress with his treatment is slow, but he feels more hopeful than he has in almost a decade. He's going to try college again this fall, at least on a part-time basis.

And he plans on staying in the Guard, with the hope that someday he can return to his full responsibilities there.

"I don't regret anything," he said. "If I had to go back [to war] again, I would. Most people grow up in a safe environment. I grew up in the Middle East, in a combat zone. That taught me about what I can overcome in life, a different kind of strength, a different kind of maturity."

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Background photo by James Warden/Stars and Stripes

Inset photo courtesy of Zach Chitwood



WHY YOU FIGHT

In Your Words

A sampling of reader stories
from stripes.com/whyyoufight

Lt. Col. Fred Wellman Retired, Army Served in Iraq

I did 13 years and got out in 2000 to join the Reserves and settled in Atlanta.

On 9/11 I was working from home on my campaign for mayor of Peachtree City, Ga., and got called by my unit that day to be mobilized on AT orders and later on active duty.

After six months of mobilization I decided to rejoin the regular Army and headed to the 101st as an aviation officer.

While in Iraq I did a bunch of interviews with various news networks and papers, so General Petraeus asked me to become division PAO, and from there another career was born.

Went back to Iraq two more times and am now am retired in DC with my own PR consulting firm.

9/11 changed the entire direction of my life.



Spc. Joel Bottem Army National Guard Served in Iraq

On 9/11, I was working at the Boeing Company in Seattle, Washington. I was an electrician on the 757 production line. As you know, 4 Boeing aircraft were hijacked; 2 767's and 2 757's.

I took the attacks very personal for many reasons: As a proud American, proud Army Veteran, and proud Boeing aircraft machinist. One year later I was laid off because of the downturn in aviation travel — a direct result of 9/11.

It took me another 18 months to convince my wife to let me join the Army National Guard. We had 2 small children, so it was a very hard decision for her. ...

Spc. Stephanie Schneider Army National Guard Deploying to Afghanistan

... I wrote in my diary on 9/11: Our country will never be the same again. We will be going to war, I just know it. And so will I.

Never would I have thought that my 11-year-old self would write such a thing. When I turned 16 and I was in high school, I had a computer teacher who really impacted my life. He was prior service in the Army and re-enlisted into the NY Air National Guard. I thought it was so amazing the things he got to do and places he got to go. I found my calling!

... Within the next few months I will be getting ready for all of the training before we deploy and I am looking forward to it. The most striking thing I have seen throughout my almost four years of service are the NCOs who are willing to do anything for their soldiers. I have seriously been impacted by their gracious acts and will never take them for granted. It's amazing to have and know people who are willing to go out of their way for you.

Afghanistan, here I come!



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Nekl Allen was sleeping soundly beside his fiancée, Amy, when the phone rang.

It was her mother, hysterical, crying out that they must turn on the TV immediately. The images on the screen are now iconic. Two towers, impaled by airplanes, flames and smoke rising. Nekl and Amy sat transfixed, staring in silence and trying to understand.

Then the towers fell and the world changed. Their world more than most.

On Sept. 10, 2001, when Amy en-

making ends meet on an enlisted man's salary. When the Iraq War began, Nekl was itching to go, and before long, he got his wish. His unit deployed in the fall of 2003.

"As it got closer and closer, he was, like, giddy," Amy said. "Of course, he was upset to leave his family, but he wanted to go over and finally do something."

He came home a year later with a less romanticized view of war but still believed deeply in what he was doing. When he left for Iraq again, from Fort Campbell, Ky., in 2005, his daughter, Grace, was 6 weeks old. He ached to think about leaving

deploying with a new unit to a new country and a set of circumstances far different than those he encountered in Iraq. He was nervous.

In the days after he left, Amy went online and designed picture books for the kids so they could still see their dad every day. Photos of him, photos of them all together in happy moments.

On Sept. 12, 2009, Amy and the kids were enjoying a lazy Saturday. Not long after waking from an afternoon nap, Amy noticed a gold Dodge Intrepid drive slowly past. She thought it odd, but disregarded it until one of the kids came to tell

fore his 10th birthday.

Grace was 4 and Michael was 7 when their father died. The picture books that Amy had made now help them cling to precious memories of him, of wrestling in the living room or the family fishing trips where Dad was the only one who would touch the fish.

Last year, Amy and the kids piled in a car on Sept. 11 and drove to Virginia with Nekl's best friend, Wayne Whiteside. On Sept. 12, they visited Nekl's grave at Arlington National Cemetery, Section 60. They'll repeat the new tradition this year and bring along with them Liza Winans,

'He wanted to ... finally do something'

By DEREK TURNER | Stars and Stripes

visioned their future together, she saw their American dream. They'd get married, work their jobs, have children and raise them up right. They'd retire and live happily ever after in upstate New York.

"Just live day to day and not have too much excitement," she said.

But that dream died on 9/11.

When the gravity of the situation revealed itself, Nekl revised the plan. He would join the Army. Amy didn't protest. That's how it was. When one of them had a strong conviction about something, the other had their back.

At a recruiter's suggestion, they moved up their wedding to Oct. 12 so they would be sure to get all available benefits. Before long, Amy was pregnant with their son, Michael — Nekl had a son, Christopher, from a previous relationship — and in May 2002, after a brief delay, Nekl went off to basic training.

He was a natural soldier, infantry and he loved it, even when they lived in a trailer outside Fort Riley, Kan.,

her, about how much she'd change while he was gone, but 11 months later he was home safe and reunited with his family.

Soon, the Awakening took hold in Iraq and the intensity of the war waned. The Allen family moved to Rhode Island, where Nekl now worked as a recruiter.

"He hated it," Amy said. He was no salesman. He was a combat soldier, decorated with the Army Commendation Medal, among other awards.

After a year of recruiting, his next duty station was Fort Drum, N.Y., a three-hour drive from the Allens' hometown of Rochester. The fighting in Afghanistan had erupted with renewed vigor, and Nekl got orders to go there in early 2009 to help put down the insurgency in the terrorist haven that gave birth to the 9/11 attacks.

Something about this assignment felt different, though. He was

her someone was at the door. When she got there she saw two soldiers in dress uniforms, a captain and a chaplain.

"No," she thought. "No, they must be asking directions."

They weren't.

As she did eight years and a day earlier, Amy froze and stared.

"You think of these things, the morbid thoughts, and you think, 'What would I do? How would I react?'" she said. "I don't think it matched anything I'd imagined."

Staff Sgt. Nekl Allen, 29, was killed earlier that day in Wardak province when a bomb exploded beneath his vehicle and insurgents attacked with small-arms fire. Another soldier, Spc. Daniel Cox, 23, was also killed and three others were injured.

Elsewhere in New York, Nekl's parents got the same knock on the door, as did his oldest son, Christopher, who got the news two days be-

Cox's fiancée. After their soldiers were killed, she and Amy developed a friendship built on shared sorrow.

"We talk a lot about it and we help each other," Amy said. "It turns out Dan had also joined the Army because of 9/11. He was still in high school when it happened and two weeks after graduating, he joined."

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have now claimed more than 6,000 American servicemembers, many of them young men not unlike Nekl, driven to serve by the aftershocks of a dark day. Amy tells his story so that others might remember 9/11 as more than a drama played out on their television screen.

"To remind people that it didn't just happen, it really caused people to do things about it," she said. "To show that people actually got off their butts and did something."

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Photos courtesy of Amy Allen





Tell the story of those who made the ultimate sacrifice at stripes.com/whyyoufight

WHY YOU FIGHT

David Kaeffring decided to enlist in the military in the moments after he watched the second plane hit the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001. The only problem was, he was just 13 years old.

"I was just this tiny, scrawny kid," recalled Kaeffring, who was then a high school freshman.

He'd been hanging out in the student lounge at Xavier High School in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, that morning, when other kids started yelling about some kind of fire or accident in New York.

"Nobody knew what was going on," Kaeffring recalled. "The girls were crying, everyone was stunned, and I was pissed."

were in" by calling in accurate and timely artillery fire. "His contribution was ... uniquely indispensable and noteworthy," Crowe said.

Kaeffring celebrated his 21st birthday during the deployment — a "completely depressing" experience, he said — before his unit came home to Fort Hood, Texas, in 2009. He was soon promoted to sergeant.

Then, he and his platoon mates were just a few buildings away from the Soldier Readiness Center on post when a gunman opened fire, killing 13 people and wounding 29 others. Army Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan is awaiting trial in connection with the attack.

"Our barracks was right down the street," he recalled. "We heard the shots ring out, and we busted out of our rooms and there were helicopters

'Everyone was stunned, and I was pissed'

BY BILL MURPHY JR. | Stars and Stripes

Kaeffring's father had served in the Marines, and he had uncles in the Army and Navy, so he'd always thought he might join one day, but 9/11 made it a near-certainty. Still, four years passed before he was able to join the Army and go on active duty as an artillery forward observer. He went to war in Kunar province, Afghanistan, from 2008 to 2009 with the 1st Battalion of the 26th Infantry Regiment, part of the 1st Infantry Division.



"I couldn't say enough good things about Kaef," his former platoon leader, Capt. Loren Crowe, said via email this month. Lowe ultimately put Kaeffring in for a Bronze Star for his service in Afghanistan, a relatively rare award considering Kaeffring's low rank at the time.

The deployment was dangerous and austere; of the 31 soldiers in Kaeffring's platoon, 15 were awarded Purple Hearts. His roommate, Staff Sgt. Brandon Farley, was killed.

"We did a raid on a village," Kaeffring said, recalling the day Farley died. "We didn't see any males. It was a very eerie feeling."

Sure enough, the platoon was ambushed on the way out of the village.

"The first two trucks went around the curve and the last two came through, and immediately: RPGs, PKMs [machine guns] and AK-47s," Kaeffring recalled. Farley "got shot in the side. We all heard that we were taking injuries, but nobody knew how bad until we got back to camp. We found out on that patrol we had six wounded and one killed in action."

Crowe, who was awarded the Silver Star for his actions during that attack, said that Kaeffring "saved lives in nearly every engagement that we

coming down. We got word from the command that everyone had to stay in barracks, stay in rooms, and lock the door. Of course, we didn't do that. We wanted to know what happened. ... It

was a chilling feeling, hearing all those automatic weapons go off and not being able to do anything about it. God, that was horrible."

Kaeffring was discharged from the Army last year. He's a student at Kirkwood Community College, less than 10 miles from his old high school. He's studying criminal justice on the GI Bill. He said he wants to become a corrections officer and work with troubled youth.

Kaeffring said he's proud of his service and glad he joined the Army. The whole experience makes him appreciate civilian life a lot more than he did before.

"Being able to do laundry, being able to eat what food I want, it's a big shock. We had no laundry and no showers [in Afghanistan]. ... I talk with a lot of my buddies, and they're taking two showers a day just because they can. We can all feel how nasty it was wearing the same uniforms over and over and over."

Most of Kaeffring's Army buddies are still on active duty, he said, and a majority "are over in Afghanistan for a second or third deployment." His old platoon leader, Crowe, for example, is back in Afghanistan. But staying in the military was never Kaeffring's plan.

"I'm very happy with how it all played," he said. "I was very blessed. That was my idea, to go to enlist, do one tour and fight and get out."

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Photos courtesy of David Kaeffring



9.11

The last decade has been filled with almost unbearably haunting images for Kyle Staples, starting with the Sept. 11 attacks.

He remembers vividly the dread of waiting in the New Jersey firehouse throughout that night without any word from his squad, wondering whether his father — dispatched shortly after the first plane hit — was among those who perished when the twin towers fell.

"The towers were where you always went on field trips when you were little," he said. "They were something you could always see in the distance. But when I heard [about the attacks], it still didn't seem real."

"When I got to the firehouse after class, and I learned that they had gone into the city, that made it real. It was personal at that point."

While he watched the city smolder just a few miles away, Staples resolved to join the military. Public service was always important to him — that why he signed up to be a volunteer firefighter at 16, persuading his father to join with him — and had been looking at the military as a way to pay for college.

But the anger the 17-year-old felt then, even after his father returned home safe, "sealed the deal."

Less than three years later, as Staples finished up his Navy corpsman training, those emotions resurfaced when he was assigned to Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland. His first day on the job coin-

still out there.

"The strength of their spirit is incredible. It astounds me to this day, that all they cared about was getting back to their guys."

It also built Staples' own resolve to serve overseas on the battlefield. He got that chance three years later in 2007, on the first of two tours in Iraq.

"There was definitely apprehension, especially after what I had seen at Bethesda," he said. "Now you're going to one of the places that caused those injuries. But there was also excitement."

"Before Bethesda, there was a lot of, 'I want to get to Afghanistan, I want to play a role in setting things right.' But once I saw Bethesda, and the majority of people we were treating were from Iraq, now I had a personal stake in what happened in Iraq."

Thankfully, neither of his tours saw anything as graphic as those 2004 battles. Staples said his unit mostly dealt with indirect fire and roadside bomb threats.

But the corpsman did leave the country with another set of haunting images: sick children whom he couldn't help because of a lack of supplies and local infrastructure.

"Particularly when you'd come across the local kids, you'd see them with illnesses, injuries, and there was absolutely nothing you could do for them," he said. "I remember one kid had a skin disease, and all I could give him was a Motrin (a basic pain reliever). It was one of the most frustrating things in the world."



'It was personal at that point'

By LEO SHANE III | Stars and Stripes

cided with the early days of the first battle of Fallujah.

"As soon as I checked in, it was right to amputations," he said. "You were always going to [Joint Base] Andrews to pick up more. There always seemed to be more."

"I remember one guy in particular, he was coming out of surgery, just coming out of anesthesia, and he's screaming for his helmet, because in his mind, he's still out there."

Staples said the pressure from the assignment was overwhelming. Doctors routinely fought against wounds that by all rights should have killed Marines days before. Hospital workers did their best to leave their emotions outside the operating rooms because the workload was too heavy to slow down.

"There's stuff I wish I could unsee, and I'm sure there's some stuff pushed back into the deep, dark corners of my brain that I'll end up having to deal with someday," he said.

But today, even while fighting off lingering memories of lost limbs and dying patients, Staples looks back at the work and the patients as an inspiration.

"It's something I still can't process," Staples said. "They'd tell me that they felt like garbage, because their guys were still out there fighting. You just lost your leg, but all you care about is that your guys are

"If those kids were in the States, it would all be taken care of, and they'd all be good. At that point, I think I got burnt out."

Ten years after 9/11, Staples is out of the active-duty military but still in the reserves, training corpsmen. He's scheduled to complete his police academy training in the next few weeks and begin patrolling the streets in Virginia.

His wife, Bailey, has only ever known him as a public servant. The pair met online while he was in Iraq and married a year after he returned. Despite that, she has told him a number of times that she wishes he'd consider a "safer" job.

Staples doesn't think that would suit him.

"I have almost a compulsion now where I feel like I have to help people," the 27-year-old said. "There were times, especially before the death of [Osama] bin Laden, that I'd say, 'I don't feel like I did enough.' Part of me still doesn't. ... I know I was part of something that they'll teach about in history for forever."

"But I look at the people who gave everything, the people that have gone back four, five, six times, the people who came back with less than they went over with, they're the ones who've really done a lot."

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Photos courtesy of Kyle Staples

WHY YOU FIGHT

After four days on patrol and a short rest, Army Sgt. James Coleman phoned his wife from his combat outpost in Afghanistan to tell her he'd soon be outside the wire again and unreachable. For how long he didn't know.

It was a major operation, he said, one that he couldn't go into much detail about. But for 27-year-old infantry squad leader, it essentially meant leading his small unit through farm fields and mud-brick villages in the Kandahar province's Zhari district, laying the groundwork for small,

in uniform is knocking at the door, everything is fine."

The couple have five children ranging from 2 to 9 years old, three of whom are from her previous marriage.

As she went about the day-to-day business of running their large family — now was time to buy new school clothes and supplies — she found herself lingering by the computer waiting for an email, or checking her cell phone for an instant message from her husband.

Becka Coleman said she is getting used to frequent silences and constant anxiety. Though he's a

An explosion announced the enemy contact Task Force Spartan had expected. Insurgents were shelling them with a recoilless rifle, a powerful anti-tank weapon Coleman likened to "an RPG on steroids." Several members of the battalion had recently been killed or wounded by Taliban using recoilless rifles.

This time, however, the shells fell harmlessly. The soldiers meanwhile were able to pinpoint the attacker's location and direct an airstrike, killing him before he escaped or improved his accuracy.

"We've lost guys to these weapons, so it was good to take that one off the

increasingly, his primary responsibility is with his wife and children.

"Sometimes I think I have to be here ... [because] what I'm doing is one of the most important things in the world," he said. "Other times I regret every minute I've missed of my children's lives. My daughter was born only about a month before my third deployment, and 16 days after my son was born, I left for my fourth deployment. I missed the entire first years of their lives."

Coleman, of Lincoln, Neb., is the third consecutive generation of his family to serve in the military. His grandfather's research uncovered

'I've spent my entire adult life fighting'

By CHRIS CARROLL | Stars and Stripes

fortified "strong points." The precarious outposts are a key part of a plan to expand the U.S.-led coalition's zone of control in the region.

It would be a welcome development if his platoon, part of the 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment's Task Force Spartan, met no resistance. But no one expected that. In recent days, Coleman's battalion had experienced heavy fighting in the district and had lost several soldiers.

Coleman is four months into his deployment to southern Afghanistan, his fifth combat tour since joining the Army at age 19 in 2003. He was single then, fueled by the sense of duty that permeated the post-9/11 Army and untethered by further responsibility. Now his identity as a soldier is shaded by the reality that he's also a husband and a father.

One late August nightfall, the members of Task Force Spartan, whose motto is "With your shield or on it," moved out from their combat outpost.

It was just before noon then at Fort Drum, N.Y. Becka Coleman, who had married James Coleman in 2007, was reconciling herself to the fact that in the best of cases, she wouldn't hear from him for days. In the worst case, well, she said she doesn't allow herself to dwell on such thoughts.

"I keep repeating to myself, no news is good news, no news is good news," she said. "As long as no one

seasoned veteran, she said, James has never been locked in the day-in, day-out conflict Task Force Spartan is fighting now.

"This is our third deployment together," she said. "On the first two, he was able to talk to me almost every day. This one has been a very different experience. We can go six days or a week without talking."

"I worry all the time about what's happening to him."

But just as James Coleman has his job as a squad leader, she has responsibilities as a military spouse. It's not just a matter of keeping things running on the home front, but managing it with a level of calm that she says she hopes her husband can sense thousands of miles away.

She fears the consequences of not doing so.

"I have to stay strong so he can stay strong and focused as a soldier, and I can have him home and we can have our happily ever after," she said.

She also feels the burden of creating a stable and secure home for her children.

"Kids are very strong, and our kids especially are," she said. "But I also know if I'm not handling things well, they're not going to handle things well. I have to be strong not just for him but for them too."

battlefield," Coleman said.

Coleman tells it as if it were simply a good day at the office. In his early years as a soldier, the tale of the engagement would have focused on the adrenaline rush and the danger. He was a different person then.

"When I was young and single, I felt invincible. I didn't even think about getting hurt," he said. "I was in the airborne jumping out of planes. I wasn't a popular kid in high school or a sports star, and so now I had that kind of sense [that] anything's possible, I can kick anybody's ass. It was empowering."

But fatherhood changed his perspective, he said. As a sergeant, his greatest satisfaction today comes not from battlefield action, but from taking raw privates just out of infantry training and, he says, "making them grow up" and giving them real-world skills necessary to succeed and survive in combat.

"It's funny because now that I'm a father, I find myself playing the father figure role with the young soldiers," he said. "Fatherhood changes you. I have a lot more to think about these days — my soldiers' well-being, my family's well-being. When I was young I only had to think about myself."

He loves serving in the Army, Coleman said, but on his fifth tour of duty, he has a gnawing feeling that



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Photos courtesy of James Coleman

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