Soldier to receive Medal of Honor from desperate battle

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Preparing for rehab

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Soldier prepares for another round of rehab

Dan Carlton and his wife Juanita say the community's support has been a blessing

By ANGEL McCURDY
Northwest Florida Daily News

FREEPORT — The Carlton home was busy for the first time in eight months Friday morning. Children played in the corner, Juanita Carlton worked to outfit one of her boys and Dan Carlton made his way around boxes with his new prosthetic leg.

The Army 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) soldier held his 2-year-old daughter tightly, rubbing her back as he talked about what it’s been like living with his young family in San Antonio while going through rehabilitation.

Carlton was injured nine months ago by an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan.

The 32-year-old chief warrant officer 2 has at least six more months of rehab before he and his family finally can move back to their home in Freeport. He and Juanita say the community has embraced them long-distance with support, donations and prayers.

“The support we’ve gotten from Northwest Florida, I can’t tell you in words how gracious everyone has been,” Carlton said. “It’s really amazing to see what people will do to help in troubling times.”

Over the next six months, Carlton will learn how to walk and swim with a prosthetic leg.

The family originally thought they would be home by October, but Carlton had some blood clots and was told it would be best for him to stay longer. He hopes they will be back in their home in Hammock Bay by March.

“It’s a little bit of a setback,” Juanita said between wrangling children and packing items to send to San Antonio. “I think as long as we’re together it’s OK. Dan’s such a positive person that this won’t affect him.

“We ultimately want to make it back to Florida, but we want him staying close to doctors as long as he needs to.”

Carlton’s left leg was amputated and his right leg was severely injured in the explosion. He took his first step with a basic prosthetic leg in March.

“The most challenging part of all of this wasn’t the fact that I didn’t have my leg, or that I couldn’t walk,” Carlton said. “I knew I was going to get better. The hardest part was the emotional ups and downs my family went through. My wife, kids, parents,
WASHINGTON (Soldiers Live) — “Help me. Please. Help me,” Spc. Stephan Mace begged as sniper bullets and rocket-propelled grenades landed all around him. His legs had been blown apart, and he tried to drag himself toward a nearby Humvee using his elbows. Although he’d nearly become incoherent because of the pain, Mace remained dry-eyed — he had lost too much blood to cry.

Inside a Humvee, just 30 yards away, two other Soldiers were trapped by intense enemy fire. They witnessed the scene around them, horrified.

“Mace is right there. He’s alive. I can get to him,” then-Spc. Ty Carter told his superior.

“No,” then-Sgt. Brad Larson replied. Hundreds of Taliban fighters surrounded their tiny, remote outpost in the mountains of Afghanistan, and had breached Combat Outpost Keating. Their radio was dead, and for all Larson knew, he, Carter and Mace might be the only Americans left alive.

The men could barely crack the Humvee’s windows to return fire before enemy snipers targeted the slivers of open space. If Carter left the vehicle, he would be mowed down in seconds.

“You’re no good to him dead,” Larson told him.

It was, Carter remembered, the worst part of the worst day of his life. He refused to give up on Mace; however, and will receive the Medal of Honor in a White House ceremony, Aug. 26, for his heroic efforts to save his comrade.

FROM MARINE TO SOLDIER
After a childhood spent between the Bay Area of California and Spokane, Wash., Carter joined the Marine Corps in 1998 as a combat engineer. He said he wanted to change his life, to live “honestly and honorably. Plus ... I could shoot guns and blow stuff up. After joining the service and being a Marine, the feeling of purpose was great.”

It was that feeling of purpose Carter said he’d miss the most when his four-year stint in the Corps was over. But five years later; after Carter had attended community college in California and was looking for a way to support his new daughter Madison, he found that sense of purpose again in the U.S. Army.

He became a cavalry scout, tasked with observing enemy movements, and was soon on his way to Afghanistan with Blue Platoon, Bravo “Black Knight” Troop, 3rd Squadron, 61st Cavalry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division.

THE FISHBOWL
When Blue Platoon first arrived in the lawless frontier region of Nuristan in May 2009, they went to Observation Post Fritsche, a tiny base high in the Hindu Kush mountains. It was meant to provide overwatch for Keating, but no one at OP Fritsche could actually see the combat outpost, which sat at the base of 10,000- and 12,000-foot mountains. The Soldiers knew Keating was dangerous, but they could never have imagined just how bad it was, and Carter was surprised to learn it.

“The stress was unrelenting. As it turned out, the enemy fighters were probing, testing the Americans to see exactly how they would respond to each type of explosion and every line of fire. They were getting ready for the attack they would launch Oct. 3, 2009.

A WORST-CASE SCENARIO
Shortly before dawn that morning, some 300 to 400 Taliban fighters surrounded Keating. The location was then manned by 53 Americans, an Afghan National Army unit and its two Latvian trainers. The incoming barrage, from B-10 recoiless rifles firing rocket-propelled grenades, known as RPGs, anti-aircraft machine guns, Russian DShK 12.7mm heavy machine guns, mortars, snipers and small arms fire, was overwhelming from the start, Carter recalled.

Blue Platoon’s job was to resupply ammunition that day, so Carter threw a Kevlar vest over his physical training clothes and grabbed the ammo he had on hand. He ran almost 900 yards through a gauntlet of bullets so thick that it “looked like it was raining” to Soldiers inside the Humvee that housed the long-range advanced scout surveillance system, known as an LRAS.

Red Platoon’s Staff Sgt. Justin Gallegos, Larson (now a first lieutenant) and Mace were already there, fighting a desperate battle against shots coming from 12 different locations, Larson recalled. He said he went through 1,200 rounds in less than 10 minutes. Mace was a brave Soldier; the best in his section, according to Larson, but he looked all at once terrified, determined and resigned. As Larson started pulling M4 magazines out of Carter’s vest, Carter realized that this was a fight for their very survival.

Sprinting back to the barracks, Carter yelled “everyone needs everything,” found some lubrication and headed to the ammo supply point. He shot the lock off one building and then another, opening the door just as an RPG exploded behind him, injuring another Soldier.

He headed back to LRAS2, but “incoming had increased so much that I was almost running in a staggered pattern because explosions were pushing me from side to side.” It was so bad that when he got there, the .240 gun outside the Humvee was destroyed, and Gallegos, Larson and Mace had been forced to take shelter inside. Mace was already wounded.

“Either get inside or leave,” they told Carter.

TRAPPED
Soon joined by Sgt. Vernon Martin, the men were trapped in a Humvee that was “rocking back and forth,” Carter remembered.

An RPG exploded the Humvee’s gun turret, demobilizing its .50-caliber gun and peppering the men with shrapnel. By this time, enemy fighters were inside the wire and after Staff Sgt. Clint Romena, who would also receive the Medal of Honor for his efforts to retake Keating, radioed Gallegos that his team couldn’t get to the scene.

See Moh PAGE 7
Military Order of Purple Heart regional commander honored

From staff reports

William “Bill” Everett has been recognized for his service to the Military Order of the Purple Heart, first as chief of staff and then as commander of MOPH Region IV.

Everett received the Military Order of the Purple Heart Distinguished Service Award at the order’s national convention in Arkansas earlier this month.

“I was very humbled and very impressed that the order felt that way and the commander felt that way,” said Everett, who lives in Baker. “We all do our best to help our veterans, particularly our wounded ones.

“That’s the main goal in life and we all work toward that purpose — what we can do to better their time on earth gives us all great pleasure.”

Everett has been with the organization since 1980. This is his fourth year as Region IV commander, which makes him the longest-serving commander of the region that spans nine southern states and Puerto Rico.

Throughout his tenure, Everett demonstrated the “hands-on” leadership that has become the hallmark of his command, according to a news release from the organization.

His personal touch, leadership and dedicated involvement affected chapters throughout the Southeast. He provides guidance and a helping hand, regardless of the time, distance, effort or difficulty involved, the news release said.

Everett’s performance as Region IV Commander has brought great credit to himself and the leadership of the Order; as well as honor and distinction to MOPH Region IV and its departments, chapters, and members, according to the release.

MOPH was formed in 1932 for the protection and mutual interest of all combat-wounded veterans and active-duty men and women who have received the decoration.

RED 7 BRIEFS

From staff reports

Emergency Services relocates

Emergency Services at Eglin Hospital are relocating to the southeast side of the hospital main building (side nearest to the Pediatric Trailer). Patients will begin to receive care in the new Emergency Room effective Aug. 26.

Fallen Defender Ruck March

The 96th Ground Combat Training Squadron invites you to their Fallen Defender Memorial Ruck March. This is not a race or a competition, but rather a memorial march to honor 11 fallen Security Forces defenders. It is open to all members of Team Eglin. It will take place at 7 a.m. Sept. 11 at Base Tango (behind the main shopette). You must provide your own ruck for the four mile march (the ruck is optional). If anyone has any questions or would like to help us honor our fellow comrades, contact Staff Sgt. Cross at 883-0736, desiree.cross@eglin.af.mil or Staff Sgt. Levan at 883-0752, wayne.levan@eglin.af.mil to register by Sept. 6.

Northwest Gate reopens for traffic

Eglin’s Northwest Gate has reopened to morning traffic from 6 to 8 a.m. The gate, formerly known as the 33rd Fighter Wing Gate, is located on Highway 85, south of the airport. It was closed due to manning constraints caused by civilian furloughs.

SOLE Luncheon

SOLE, the International Society of Logistics, FWB Chapter, will hold its August luncheon at 11 a.m. Aug. 29 at Coach N Four Restaurant, 1313 Lewis Turner Blvd. This month’s speaker will be our own Col. Raymond Wagner, A4R. He will speak on “AFSOC A4 Perspectives.” All logisticians from all services/departments are invited. RSVP NLT Aug. 25 to Jim Foster, 850-420-3149, or Mark Syzdek, HQ AFSOC/A4MU, 8844-2053.

Boat operations in the Gulf of Mexico

Residents may experience noise when the 96th Operations Group conducts morning boat operations in the Gulf of Mexico south of Destin. The test missions will run now through Sept. 13, Monday through Thursday. They are part of the 53rd Wing’s Maritime Strike Program.

Fighter aircraft will release munitions in the mornings about 20 nautical miles...
Close Air Support Training

A Soldier goes over his notes during a AC-130 Live Fire Training on an Eglin Air Force Base range Aug. 15. The Soldiers from 7th Group and the 19th ASOS from Hurlburt Field conducted the training exercise where they were able to Call For Fire on targets on the range.

STAFF SGT. RAMON M MARRERO | U.S. Army

BRIEFS FROM PAGE 4
out in the Gulf. They will be released within a cordoned range safety corridor. Notices to mariners will be issued prior to the missions and flyers will be handed out at the local marina.

Feds feed families
Children and Families are in great need of donated food this summer. Federal employees will join together to collect food nationwide for local food banks.

Bring non-perishable food items and place them into a designated collection box located in your Federal workplace. Boxes will be picked up Aug. 28. Visit www.FedsFeedFamilies.gov or email FedsFeedFamilies@usda.gov.

Catholic religious education
Eglin Chapel Catholic Religious Education Classes for students from kindergarten through the sacrament of Confirmation begin Sept. 8. Classes meet Sunday mornings from 9:30-10:30. Registration will be held following Masses on Aug. 25 or in the Chapel Center office by appointment. For information, contact Valerie Counsman at 882-7322.

 Indoor Movie
Every third Friday of the month, March through September, a family movie will be shown indoors at 7 p.m. at the Crossroads. Koala Kid on Sept. 20. Movies are free and will be shown on the big screen. 850-651-1010

 Free Golf for Club Members
All Eglin Bayview Club primary members, plus their spouses and children (18 years and younger), are invited to stop by the Club to pick up a certificate for free golf, redeemable for one free round at the Eglin Golf Course during the month of August. Certificates must be presented at the Golf Course Pro Shop at the time of redemption. It pays to be a member: 850-651-1010

 Full Moon Paddle
Experience the unique phenomenon of paddling under a full moon at Post’l Point. Meet at Post’l Point just before sunset (call for exact time). Cost is $20 per canoe or kayak. Sign up at Outdoor Recreation. Outing is planned for Sept. 19. 850-882-5058

Eglin Zombie Run Oct. 26
Run for your life at Eglin’s 2nd Annual Zombie Run, starting at 5 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 26 at the Eglin Golf Course. Event is open to the public. Opening festivities begin at 4:30 p.m., followed by a safety briefing for all runners. At the end of the 4.4-mile race, participants will celebrate their survival—or their zombie transformation—with music, food, and beverages. Participants receive an event t-shirt, a medal, plus a photo op with zombies. Prizes will be awarded to the top male and female competitors. Registration is open to ages 14 and up. Visit www.active.com until 1500 are registered. Entry fee is $40 per person. Watch for additional race details and link to registration on www.euginforcesupport.com. 850-883-1682

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Gay and lesbian service members assigned more than 100 miles from a state where same-sex marriages are legal, or assigned overseas, will be granted extra days of leave to travel where they can marry legally, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel announced Wednesday.

The special homosexual “marriage leave,” effective immediately and allowable only once in a member’s career, won’t count against 30 days annual leave that every active-duty member earns.

Non-chargeable leave of up to seven days will be granted if the gay or lesbian member or service couple who wants to wed is assigned within the continental United States. Those wishing to marry while posted outside of the continental U.S. will get up to 10 days of extra leave.

Hagel explained his reasoning for the extraordinary benefit in an Aug. 13 memo to service secretaries, which also directed that full military benefits be provided to married gay members, including spouse ID cards, by Sept. 3.

“We recognize that same-sex couples not stationed in a jurisdiction that permits same-sex marriage would have to travel to another jurisdiction to marry,” Hagel wrote. So the department will “allow military personnel in such a relationship non-chargeable leave for the purpose of traveling to a jurisdiction where such a marriage may occur. This will provide accelerated access to the full range of benefits offered to military married couples throughout the department, and help level the playing field between opposite sex and same-sex couples seeking to be married.”

Full benefits to married same-sex couples, to include TRICARE coverage, higher “with dependents” housing allowances and family separation allowances, are to be made retroactive to June 26, 2013, the date of the U.S. Windsor Supreme Court decision that struck down as unconstitutional a portion of the Defense of Marriage Act.

That decision made gay and lesbians with state marriage licenses eligible for all federal benefits available to other married citizens. Military gay couples, if legally married before that decision, will be in line for back pay of higher allowances and spouse medical care reimburments.

For gay and lesbian members married after June 26, spouse entitlements begin at the date of marriage. Any claim to spouse entitlements before that date will be denied, Defense officials said.

The extra leave benefit will not be made retroactive for gay or lesbian members who, following the Supreme Court decision, had used earned leave to travel to states where they could marry legally, said Navy Lt. Cmdr. Nate Christensen, a spokesman for the DoD office of personnel and readiness.

The new leave benefit drew criticism from same-sex or opposite-sex marriages, and will recognize all marriages that are valid in the place of celebration,” explained Jessica L. Wright, acting undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, in a separate memo to the services.

The Department of Defense “will work to make the same benefits available to all spouses regardless of whether they are in same-sex or opposite-sex marriages, and will recognize all marriages that are valid in the place of celebration,” explained Jessica L. Wright, acting undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, in a separate memo to the services.

UC-123K pilot wins Agent Orange claim

After a two-year battle with the Air Force and Department of Veterans Affairs, a group of ailing Air Force Reserve aviators has won a bittersweet victory: VA acknowledgment that one of their own likely is gravely ill due to post-Vietnam War exposure to toxic residue on UC-123K Provider aircraft, which were used as herbicide “spray birds” during the war.

Lt. Col Paul Bailey of New Hampshire, a cancer patient in hospice care, received notice this month that the VA had approved his disability claim, citing a “preponderance of evidence” suggesting exposure to herbicides, including Agent Orange, on C-123s he flew on missions after the war.

The decision is important because, for the first time, a VA regional office is recognizing that a C-123 crew member was exposed to herbicides and should be compensated for ailments the VA presumes are linked to Agent Orange. Former C-123 veterans who previously won VA compensation did so on appeal after the VA had denied their initial claims. That meant payment delays in compensation and access to VA care for up to two years, said retired Maj. Wesley T. Carter of McMinnville, Ore.

Carter, a former reserve C-123 aviator, has led an intensive bureaucratic fight on behalf of fellow crewmen since 2011. That year, as we reported at the time, he filed a complaint to the Air Force inspector general that health officials knew since 1996 of contamination aboard aircraft flown by reserve squadrons until 1982, and failed to warn them of the health risks.

Carter learned the government had stopped a contract to sell C-123s because of contamination and that the Air Force struggled over how to dispose of the aircraft. Even burying them could contaminate the ground. In 2010, the last of the aircraft were torn apart and melted down for disposal.

Reacting to Bailey’s award, Carter, who is rated 100-disabled from cancer and heart disease, said he felt “immense satisfaction and gratitude. But I’m tired and ill. Why did we have to work so hard to get our VA care? As sick or injured veterans, our focus needed to be on our medical needs and our families, not on years of struggle with the VA.”

Tom Philpott is a syndicated columnist. You may write to him at Military Update, P.O. Box 23111, Centreville, VA 20120-1111; or at milupdate@aol.com.
Carter obeyed. “I’ll get to you as soon as I can,” he yelled to Mace. Carter didn’t know Mace well, but he was a Soldier and he was injured.

“(It) basically just kind of crushed me — the look on Mace’s face — it was destroying me inside,” Carter said.

“I understood why Larson said I couldn’t go,” he conceded. “I still feel grateful he said that because I wasn’t thinking in tactical terms. ... It didn’t (make it easier), but he saved my life.”

Carter did make it to a second Humvee that was only 10 or 15 feet behind them. It was “full of holes, cut up, punched right through the armor,” but it also housed ammunition he and Larson desperately needed, and Larson finally agreed to let Carter go after Mace if he waited for one of the dozens of aircraft that swarmed Keating to make a run.

**DARING RESCUE**

Carter dashed to Mace and performed first aid under heavy fire before verifying that Gallegos was dead (Martin was missing). After another trip to confer with Larson, Carter carried Mace to the relative safety of the vehicle.

He estimated that Mace had been bleeding for about 45 minutes. His legs were mangled. His abdomen was gushing blood that had turned black.

He “was getting worse by the second,” Carter said. With Larson’s permission, Carter exposed himself to enemy fire and left the Humvee once again, looking for anything that could help them.

“I never felt so alone in my life,” he remembered. “It’s like even the grass blades were out to kill you. ... Everything was a threat. ... The air smelled like burnt carbon ... (and) burning plastic because of the rocket-propelled grenades. ... It was sour; sulfury ... thick and angry.”

And then, there it was: Gallegos’ radio. And it worked.

Carter dashed back to the Humvee, and Larson coordinated with Romesha and Red Platoon’s lieutenant to “release the death blossom,” Carter said.

It was like World War II,

**SEE MOH PAGE 8**
spread to the tactical operations center, referred to as a TOC, and then to a tree that sat between the TOC and the aid station where medical personnel were hard at work giving Mace five buddy-to-buddy blood transfusions, a first for battlefield medicine. The tree had to come down.

Carter was the only one who knew how to work a chainsaw, so as burning embers fell on his neck, he chopped the tree until it fell onto the TOC, saving the aid station.

THE NIGHTMARE CONTINUES

The battle lasted for more than 12 hours. Adrenaline kept the men going, and the need to stay alive superseded any thoughts of the seven Soldiers who had already died, including Gallegos and Martin. That night, however; after reinforcements arrived, they had time to think about their fallen brothers.

It was “absolutely terrible,” Carter remembered, “because that’s when the emotions hit.” And it got even worse when they learned that Mace, who had finally been evacuated half a day after he was wounded, died in surgery.

“One of the things that kept me going was thinking that Larson and I were able to save Mace, and to hear that he died — I was destroyed.”

Down to just the uniforms on their backs and the weapons in their hands, Hill, Carter and the rest of Blue Platoon spent the next few nights outside on tops of containers. Under intermittent fire for the next few days, they slept for just a few minutes at a time. And if the aircraft that constantly patrolled the skies above went silent for even a moment, everyone immediately went into battle mode once again.

Finally, three days after the battle, the Army sent the Soldiers to Forward Operating Base Bostick before bombing the now-ruined Keating. With another six months before the deployment ended, it wasn’t long before Black Knight Troop was back in the fight. In fact, an improvised-explosive device blew up a Humvee that carried Hill, Carter and two other Soldiers just months later.

THE HIGHEST HONOR

It was at Forward Operating Base Bostick that Hill told Carter their leaders had recommended him for the Medal of Honor. The image of Mace begging for help haunted Carter. He was just beginning a long struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder, and at the time, was wearing sunglasses constantly because his “eyes would always well up.”

The Medal of Honor? Carter was almost insulted.

“Why would I even care about that right now?” he told Hill. Carter pushed it to the back of his mind, got help for the trauma of the battle, returned to Joint Base Lewis-McCord, Wash., deployed to Afghanistan again, remarried and became a stepfather and a father for a second time. After almost four years, Carter never really believed it would happen.

In fact, when a colonel recently called from the Pentagon to ask if Carter would be available to receive a phone call from a high-ranking officer at a certain date and time, Carter initially said no. He was taking his family on vacation.

“You know what this is,” his wife, Shannon, told him, and Carter agreed to plan their trip around the call. On the appointed day, they loaded their three kids into a camper and headed down the highway from Crater Lake, Ore., pulling into a gas station to wait for the call.

It was President Barack Obama, calling to give Carter the news. “I was like, ‘OK,’” Carter said after he hung up the phone. Then he “hopped in the truck and continued on with the vacation.”

Carter’s first thoughts were what the medal would mean to his family. It was arrogant and selfish, he said, and now he’s “trying to do what I can to make sure that everybody in Black Knight Troop is recognized for this, especially the families, who . . . deserve this honor far more than I do.”

Because of Carter and the other Soldiers who tried to help her son, Adelson said, Mace died in peace. “I’m so grateful . . . because Stephan could have died in the dirt,” she said. “I’m just overwhelmed with pride that another one of our Keating Soldiers is getting the Medal of Honor; but also that it was the person who rescued my son.”

For his part, Hill’s first reaction was “It’s about time . . . I knew deep down inside that it was going to happen eventually, because knowing what he went through and knowing the extraordinary circumstances that he and everyone else faced, there was no way that something like this could be passed up.”

REHAB

brother — the times I saw them struggling with this were the hardest for me.”

Carlton struggled only slightly while maneuvering around boxes piled high to make his way to an empty chair. He’s been upgraded to a new prosthetic that can be used for walking and running and can be submerged in water. In therapy he’s trying to walk as if he weren’t wearing a prosthetic.

“I’ve put a lot of hours in the mirror,” he said. “I’m trying to discipline myself to make small strides and not limp. I’m essentially learning to walk again.”

Carlton was laid up in a hospital bed for months as he went through therapy and worked on healing before he could begin to use the prosthetic. Now, he says life’s getting back to normal.

“We’re back to a routine,” he said. “I can drive, so I’m taking the children to school and sports, things I used to do all the time.”