



Face of Defense: Soldier Receives Bronze Star for Heroic Actions

By Sgt. 1st Class Eric Hendrix, USA
Special to American Forces Press Service

FORWARD OPERATING BASE FENTY, Afghanistan, March 10, 2008 – Army Sgt. 1st Class Michael Loetz recently received a Bronze Star Medal for Valor for saving the life of an Afghan truck driver in 2007.



Army Sgt 1st Class Michael Loetz, of Company F, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, is awarded a Bronze Star Medal for Valor for rescuing an Afghan truck driver during an ambush in eastern Afghanistan. Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Eric Hendrix, USA

The story behind the rescue is both harrowing and heartwarming.

The Distribution Platoon of Company F, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, had just taken over combat logistics patrol operations and were taking a load of ammunition to troops in the Korengal Valley on May 30, 2007.

“I took over a platoon with a lot of brand-new privates with no experience,” said Loetz, a 37-year-old native of Charleston, S.C. “The roads hadn’t been improved at all. We were almost tearing the doors off the trucks because it was cliff on one side, rocks on the other.”

Distro platoon’s mission is to take vital supplies to locations where supply helicopters can’t get to. It will often use the services of area Afghan drivers and their rugged vehicles nicknamed “jingle trucks.” Loetz’s platoon delivers ammunition, mail and everything in between to warfighters in these

hard-to-reach locations. It’s a dangerous drive into the Korengal Valley.

“We got hit going up the road. It was just small-arms fire, but the jingle truck in front of me got hit,” Loetz said. A firefight ensued, and the Afghan driver of the truck in front of Loetz got out and crawled underneath the truck for safety. “We talked the driver out from under the vehicle (after suppressing enemy fire), got him back in the truck and continued on,” Loetz said.

At the top of the hill where the load of ammunition was to be dropped, Loetz talked with the Afghan driver and told him that as long as he stayed with the platoon on the way back down, he would make sure that the driver got to the bottom in one piece.

Then the worst happened.

“We got hit by an (improvised explosive device) on the way back down,” Loetz said. “At least three (rocket-propelled grenades) hit the side of the cliff below my truck, and at least two hit the rock wall above it.”

The jingle truck in front of him took some small-arms fire, tearing up its front end. “At that point, we were separated from our lead element, and we couldn’t drive around the jingle truck on that narrow road,” Loetz said.

Loetz’s gunner was laying suppressive fire with a .50 caliber machine gun. “I said, ‘the hell with it,’ and I got out of the truck and went and grabbed the jingle truck driver,” Loetz explained. “He was hiding under the rear axle of his truck trying to avoid getting hit again.”

Despite the hail of gunfire, Loetz put his own life in jeopardy, snatched the Afghan driver and threw him in the backseat of the Humvee.

“He had no way to protect himself and no way to defend himself. I had already promised him that we would take care of him,” Loetz said. “You just don’t go back on a word like that. I knew that if I didn’t get him, he would stay right there and die.”

The next step was to get the platoon back together and move down the hill. “I was thinking that I needed to move the jingle truck just enough to get my vehicle around it,” Loetz said. “There was just no room. So, I pushed it off the cliff.”

Trying to push the truck off the cliff with a Humvee was not feasible because of the possibility of damaging their ride out of the valley. Loetz pushed the truck so that it would roll off the side of the cliff. The jingle truck tumbled more than 100 feet to the valley bottom.

Army Lt. Col. William Ostlund, commander of 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, talked about seeing the event unfold from the battalion operations center on Camp Blessing. “I remember very well, watching the video feed and watching as the truck rolled over the cliff, thinking that it was one of our trucks and it took the breath out of me,” Ostlund said.

On the road, Loetz was getting his convoy back together. “We were still taking small-arms fire, and I got back in my vehicle and we were assessing the situation. By that time, Company A had moved into an over-watch position and locked on the opposite side of the valley,” Loetz said.

The coordinated suppressing-fire effort gave the distribution platoon the chance to get out of the kill zone and down the hill to safety.

Ostlund recounted getting the good news that Loetz's convoy had gotten out of the valley safely. "We got word that not only did we not lose any soldiers from (Company F), but we didn't lose an (Afghan) either. The local population is our center of gravity. We need to maintain the love and affections of the population and protect them. And if we put them at risk and don't do everything to protect them, we're really not doing what we're supposed to be doing here," Ostlund said.

The lanky platoon sergeant from whom those brand-new privates had learned a valuable lesson said only: "It's what you train for."

(Army Sgt. 1st Class Eric Hendrix is assigned to 22nd Mobile Public Affairs Detachment.)