

Medic who rescued troops from flames earns Distinguished Service Cross

By Don Kramer
Fort Lewis Guardian

The deep boom of an explosion shook the ground and awoke Staff Sgt. Christopher Waiters from sleep on April 5, 2007. The 3rd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division Soldier had just bedded down after a nine-hour guard-duty shift in Old Baqubah, Iraq.

A vehicle-borne improvised explosive device detonated on a street nearby, engulfing a Bradley Fighting Vehicle and its crew in flames, leading Waiters to perform actions that earned him a Distinguished Service Cross in December 2008.

At the time of the incident, Waiters was a specialist and senior line medic attached to A Company, 5th Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment. Waiters readied his medical evacuation Stryker vehicle for casualties while on the ride to the site of the burning Bradley.

The medical vehicle drove in tandem with another Stryker, which included 1st Lt. Timothy Price, the company executive officer. "We pulled around the corner," Waiters said, "and the whole street [was] on fire. People [were] running. People [were] shooting."

The Stryker vehicles pulled up to form a makeshift security perimeter about 80 meters from the burning Bradley, Price facing west and the MEV east. Both started firing at enemy gunmen. Waiters said he saw two "trying to hook quick right" and engaged them with his M4 rifle. But his mind was on the Soldiers trapped in a Bradley across the field. He turned to fellow medic, Sgt. Joseph Miller.

"I gotta go," Waiters replied. He remembers his friend warning him as he sprinted into the chaos.

"You might not come back," he heard Miller say.

"All I could think of was burning truck, casualties, American Soldiers injured," Waiters said.

As Waiters dashed into the open street, an insurgent truck came at him with a U.S. 50-caliber machine gun firing, hitting a nearby vehicle. He dodged the wreckage and sprinted to the burning Bradley.

"[I] start[ed] thinking 'What am I doing?' But part of me just said keep going. I thought, 'I'm already in hell, might as well keep going.'"

He attracted small-arms fire from all directions as he pulled the first American crewman out of the vehicle. Waiters helped him regain his breath and wrapped his burned hand. When another Bradley rolled up to help with security, he loaded the wounded Soldier on board and went back to the burning vehicle.

Waiters saw the gunner's hand snake out of the turret. Despite the flames, he grabbed him and pulled out the gunner. He shielded the victim's body as he dragged him to the same Bradley, getting him oxygen.

As he gasped for breath, the Soldier told Waiters of a third crewman in the crippled

Bradley. Without hesitation, the medic went back to the vehicle, now almost completely in flames. He realized there was no way the Soldier could have survived. Suddenly, 25 mm rounds began bouncing around the inside of the vehicle. "I couldn't breathe, and I lost sight of the Soldier," he said.

With his clothes charred and the bottoms of his boots melted, he ran back to his vehicle to get a body bag. He returned once more and pulled out the deceased crewman.

Soon afterward, another medical team arrived to take control of the scene, and Waiters, Miller and crew sped the casualties to the nearest forward operating base for medevac.

Another medic on the scene, Sgt. Jeffrey Anello, said he was shocked when he surveyed the wreckage.

"Seeing the Bradley smoldering and knowing [Waiters] was able to retrieve two of the Soldiers in it alive was amazing," Anello said.



Photo courtesy U.S. Army

Specialist (now Staff Sgt.) Christopher Waiters attempts to climb into a burning Bradley to rescue a Soldier trapped in the vehicle after he had treated and safe-guarded two other casualties back to his Stryker Medical Evacuation Vehicle.

