

THE Falcon Flyer

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“Marne Air!”

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An Amputee Returns to the battlefield

Story and photos by
Sgt. Luke Rollins



Staff Sgt. Brandon Vilt performs a maintenance check on a Kiowa helicopter Feb. 15 at Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan. Vilt, a Cameron Park, Calif., native who lost his leg during a 2007 deployment to Iraq, said he deployed with Task Force Lighthorse because he loves what he does and feels he is a valuable asset to the mission.

KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, Afghanistan

– It’s clear from the way Staff Sgt. Brandon Vilt moves around the maintenance bay of Delta Troop, 3rd Squadron, 17th Cavalry Regiment, Task Force Lighthorse, that he has his mission in mind. An OH-58 “Kiowa” helicopter crew chief responsible for the maintenance of the troop’s fleet, he and his Soldiers keep the “moshshe”—Pashtu for mosquito because of its bite and illusive nature, and the nickname for the Kiowa—flying to bring the fight to the enemy.

“I just want to make sure my guys put out a good, quality product,” said Vilt, a Cameron Park, Calif., native.

Not only is he responsible for the Soldiers on the maintenance bay floor, but he’s also a platoon sergeant. If he’s not overseeing the maintenance of Kiowas, he’s up in the office loft doing administrative work for his Soldiers.

Vilt moves up the stairs to his office. The motivation in each upward step ignites a spark of inspiration among his coworkers, and if he feels any pain, he’s too humble to show it.

“Stairs are the worst,” he says, collapsing into his office chair. A prosthetic leg hangs on the rear wall. Vilt rolls up his left pant leg to reveal the prosthesis helping him accomplish the mission at Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan.

Vilt, who lost his leg during his first deployment to Iraq in 2007, said he decided to deploy a second time with Task Force Lighthorse and Task Force Falcon, 3rd Combat Aviation Brigade, because he simply loves what he does.

He was guarding an entry control point when a truck came barreling through and caused the cement barriers on either side of the road to topple. One fell on him.

“All I could think in the moment was, ‘Get this thing off of me!’” he said. “It was surreal to be told the leg was gone for good.”

He underwent surgery and physical therapy at the Bob Wilson Naval Hospital in San Diego, Calif. While there he considered leaving the Army, but his experiences as a squad leader in the Warrior Transition Battalion reminded him of his love for Soldiering—and helicopters.

“I was always in good spirits,” he said. “I just thought, ‘I got to get back to aviation.’”

He did, becoming an advanced individual training instructor in the U.S. Army Aviation Center of Excellence at Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Va. He arrived at Hunter Army Airfield, Ga., in Sept. 2011.

First Sgt. Paul Julien, the Delta Troop first sergeant, said that Vilt’s resilience and positive outlook make him a beacon to Soldiers and peers throughout the Task Force.

“He’s a pleasure to be around,” said Julien. “He’s an outstanding leader of Soldiers, dedicated to their development—they respect what he’s been through, his ability to overcome all that and stay motivated.”

Julien recalled a particularly difficult troop run when Vilt’s determination galvanized his fellow Soldiers.

“Everyone was struggling,” he said. “And then, out of nowhere, Staff Sgt. Vilt runs up to the formation. The amount of motivation for the troops was indescribable.”

Though Pfc. Andrew Wegner, a Kiowa maintainer and one of Vilt’s Soldiers, was not yet with the unit for that run, he was regaled with stories of Staff Sgt. Vilt at the USAACE schoolhouse.

As is often the case, there’s a difference

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**A Message from Chief Warrant Officer 5
Randy Godfrey
Chief Warrant Officer of the Brigade**

Marne Air and Rock of the Marne!

Greetings from Afghanistan, where the Soldiers, Noncommissioned Officers, Warrant Officers, and Officers of Task Force Falcon are serving our nation in Operation Enduring Freedom. As the Chief Warrant Officer in the task force, I want to highlight the great work being accomplished by the fellow warrant officers in the unit.

Warrant Officers find solutions and implement those solutions to enhance our war fighting mission. They are flying missions in the challenging conditions of snowy and rainy days and cold dark nights. We have Warrant Officers showing leadership and initiative outside the cockpit. These efforts ensure the safety of our aircrews, assist our coalition partners, and aid our fellow warriors.

Chief Warrant Officer 2 Ken Bochat, Task Force Knighthawk, is assisting our United Arab Emirates coalition partners CH-47 detachment, in addition to his duties as a pilot in command flying critical missions in support of the Soldiers on the ground. The UAE commander took the time to mention his superior performance by name. Bochat's effort exemplifies the Army Value of Selfless Service.

When a fellow Warrant Officer fell ill, Chief Warrant Officer 2 Ben Hickman, Task Force Viper, immediately provided buddy

aid. He notified the proper personnel and arranged for assistance. In preparation for transport to medical facility, he packed a bag to accompany the Warrant Officer providing essential living and comfort items. Hickman's efforts contributed to the Soldier's full recovery exemplify the Soldier's Creed passage, "I will never leave a fallen comrade."

Chief Warrant Officer Scott Reagan, Task Force Warhorse, developed and implemented the CAB Downed Aircraft Recovery Team (DART) program. To ensure successful implementation, he is a team leader for training and missions. In the unlikely event of an unplanned aircraft landing "outside the wire," this program ensures a safe, secure, and rapid recovery of our assets, but more importantly our Soldiers and aircrews. Reagan's leadership reflects the Warrior Ethos of "I will always place the mission first."

We bid farewell to Task Force Storm. The professional leadership of Chief Warrant Officer 5 Tom Walton and Chief Warrant Officer 4 Jeff Starritt ensured successful

completion of their mission, and all together they return with honor to family and friends. We welcome Task Force Apocalypse to the Marne Air Team. They will continue great aviation support legacy to our Soldiers and coalition partners in Regional Command West.

Stay in the fight; I appreciate the hard work you are doing out there in support of the mission. We in Task Force Falcon provide no fail support to the Soldier on the ground. We must ask ourselves each day: "What are we doing for the Warfighter?" •



Chief Warrant Officer 5 Scott Reagan, Task Force Workhorse, developed and implemented the brigade Downed Aircraft Recovery Team (DART) program.

THE FALCON FLYER

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“Crazy” Company, ANA Partner in Zabul Province

Story by Sgt. Luke Rollins, Task Force Falcon Public Affairs

FORWARD OPERATING BASE WOLVERINE, Afghanistan – Sergeant Kagan Dejarnatt, a cavalry scout team leader with Charlie “Crazy” Company, 5th Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment, Task Force Viper, peered down into a hole he suspected hid a weapons cache. Trusting his Afghan National Army counterparts to secure the area while on a joint patrol in the Zabul province, Dejarnatt probed further to gauge the size of the cave.

Nothing materialized.

“There was no real evidence that anyone had been at the sites [where we patrolled] for awhile,” said Dejarnatt, a Melissa, Texas, native, indicating the relative stability of the area.

The Feb. 23 patrol was part of Charlie Company’s larger mission to participate in partnered clearing missions with the ANA and train their partners in sling load operations.

Charlie Company is the ground force for Task Force Viper, an aviation task force. Together with the ANA they execute search missions on the ground, to find and eliminate the threat.

Dejarnatt said he enjoys the working relationship the company has developed with the ANA.

“The first mission we did, we brought six [Afghan Soldiers] with us,” he said. “The moment we started finding things, the ANA immediately cordoned off the area and established a security perimeter so that myself and the explosive ordnance disposal team could perform further analysis.”

It helps that Charlie Company’s relationship with the ANA extends to the Pathfinder Academy, which they administer from FOB Wolverine. The course emphasizes sling load operations, but includes instruction in small unit tactics, tactical site exploitation, combat medical skills, air assault and pathfinder operations, said Capt. James Boston, the company commander.

Proficiency in all these skills applies directly

to their partnered missions.

Working with the ANA has been a matter of mutual respect, said Dejarnatt, and he’s pleased with the direction of the relationship as they prepare for future partnered missions.

“I’m thoroughly impressed with their tactical knowledge,” said Dejarnatt. “Here, in these situations, I depend on them just as much as I do my [Charlie Company] battle buddies.”



Afghan National Army soldiers sweep for weapons during a partnered mission with Charlie Company, 5th Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment, Task Force Viper, Feb. 23 in the Zabul province of Afghanistan. Charlie Company, the rapidly deployable ground force for Task Force Viper, participates in partnered missions with the ANA as well as conducting their Pathfinder Academy. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Keith Burghardt)

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between the man and the legend preceding him, but Wegner said meeting Vilt revealed both Vilt’s down-to-earth demeanor and his dedication to the mission.

“His mentality is different,” said Wegner, a Fort Bragg, Calif., native. “He’s a relaxed guy, but he gives it his all. He gets up there and does all the maintenance like the rest of us. He doesn’t let the leg stop him.”

Vilt keeps his motivation with a three-step approach: openness, communication, and humor.

Where Wegner and others were once wary to broach the subject of his leg, now it’s just one more topic in the good-natured ribbings

among fellow Soldiers. For his part, Vilt said he doesn’t tire of using his prosthesis for the occasional practical joke.

“I mean, I miss my leg, but I might as well have fun with this one,” he said.

Though the atmosphere is light, accomplishing the mission is still the Delta Troop Soldiers’ top priority. Wegner acknowledged the gravity of both Vilt’s injury and securing the future of Afghanistan.

“It is very motivational to know someone can go through such a traumatic experience and still have the drive to stay in the military and deploy,” he said. “I’m honored to have him as my first platoon sergeant.”



For Vilt, it always has been and always will be equal parts labor and love.

“I still love what I do,” he said. “I love my job, I love working with Soldiers. I’m just trying to do my part. I’m still capable, and I feel I have something valuable to add to this mission.”

MARNE AIR WARRIOR of the month

CW2 Deanne Murawsky
AMSO
C/3-17
Task Force LIGHTHORSE

Chief Warrant Officer 2 Deanne Murawsky



works tirelessly as the Charlie Troop, Task Force Lighthorse, Aviation Mission Survivability Officer. Specifically, she has dedicated her time toward implementing the new flight planning software released by the Department of Evaluation and Standardization. Prior to Chief Warrant Officer Murawsky, no unit in the Army has been able to implement and manipulate the software as intended. Murawsky took the challenge from DES in garrison and has worked for approximately four months to implement the software. Murawsky coordinated with the Quality Control office to ensure the program directly downloaded the current weight and balance files from the authorized and approved QC files on a daily basis. She then loaded all of the data required for the current mission configuration of the OH-58D helicopter. Her determination enabled the new software to function as designed and DES will ensure her conclusions are distributed to the rest of the OH-58D units throughout the Army. This software will allow the OH-58D aviators to predict their aircraft performance in the unforgiving conditions of southern Afghanistan. Her determination and work ethic bring great credit upon herself, Charlie Troop, Task Force Lighthorse, and Task Force Falcon. •



Col. Allan Pepin, commander of Task Force Falcon, addresses attendees of a reenlistment and recognition ceremony at the task force headquarters Feb. 22 at Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. Chad Ashe)

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