

Native American Soldier Saves Rio Rancho Man's Life in Iraq

by Mike Trissell

I was UDT (Underwater Demolition Team) in the Navy back in 1983.

After I got out I went looking for the ultimate prize, "The Pulitzer Prize". I now work as a freelance reporter for AP - "Associated Press".

It was Saturday, January 21, 2006, we were on a routine patrol, the kind that really had no danger to it, the kind I have done over and over again. They would let reporters and cameramen out to these places because they knew they were safe. Well, they thought it was safe.

We pulled up to a checkpoint outside of Al Huwajah, Iraq, just like we did the week before, but something was different. The flipped-over armored personnel carrier was turned sideways to us. This personnel carrier usually was placed so the headlights were facing us as we approached the roadblock. I was getting ready to say something when I heard the driver yell, AMBUSH!

Blood was everywhere, the soldier in the passenger seat had taken a bullet in the forearm and the driver, while getting out of the jeep, was shot in the leg. I had managed to crawl out of the back seat through the rear of the vehicle, but before I knew it we were surrounded by al-Qaeda. The insurgents dragged us to the other side of the armored personnel carrier and lined us up forcing us to our knees. They walked up to me and said something, and then one man grabbed my hair and pulled my head back exposing my Adams apple. The Iraqi militant bent down and put a huge knife to my neck. The driver, who was kneeling next to me, whispered... "He is going to decapitate you."

As I looked out across the miles of sand dunes, an enormous dust devil swooped down and in the thick cloud of dust was the figure of an American Indian wearing desert camouflage. The sand stung my eyes and... and made it very hard to breath. I could hear the blood curdling screams of the Iraqi militants, "Allah - Allah - Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala", and then there was a strange silence.

As the dust settled the soldier walked up to us and asked if we were all right. I glanced at the front of his desert camouflage BDU shirt and spotted his nametag. I said, "Thank you, Begay". The patch on his sleeve identified his unit, the 327th Infantry. I decided this guy should receive the badge of honor. However, the desert wind picked up again and the soldier was gone. He just disappeared. The driver and passenger didn't see him at all, but they heard him.

We got back to the base and filled our report and discovered that Spc Clifton J. Begay, from the 327th Infantry, had been killed at a check point less than 20 clicks from us the day before. We stood in shock and disbelief.

When I returned to the States, I located his family and they confirmed his death. The family shared stories about this young man and I spoke about his bravery.