

An American Hero

Captain James Van Thach discusses his army experience

By ROBERT GOLOMB

It can be reasonably assumed that upon their graduation, most of the several hundred students of Touro Law School's Class of June 2002 were preparing to take their

PROFILE

upcoming bar examinations and looking forward to starting their careers in the public or private legal sector once (and if) they passed them. For as a general rule, such is the professional path followed by most law school graduates across America. But that generalization has its exceptions, and a most notable one is Captain James Van Thach.

Thach, who had served in the United States Army reserves from his 1994 freshman year at St.

TV to take a fast break ... I saw the images of the first plane hitting the tower ... then the second plane hit ... I learned that my country was under attack from foreign terrorists. I wanted to honor all the people who had been murdered on 9/11 and do my part to protect America from ever again suffering such a heinous attack. ... I felt the way to accomplish that would not be by sitting behind a desk, but by fighting the enemy face to face on the battlefield."

Before going to fight the enemy, however, Thach would first help his country in another way. An auxiliary police officer in the 105th precinct, situated in the eastern part of Queens bordering Nassau County, Thach volunteered to patrol Jewish sites that law enforcement feared might be on the terrorists' hit list.

As important as his work as an auxiliary officer was, it turned out to be a temporary respite. In early 2003, the Army swore in Thach as an infantry officer. And three years later, on March 1, 2006, Thach, as he had hoped for since 9/11, was in Baghdad fighting terrorists. And doing more than just fighting, he told me. "We were also engaged in humanitarian aide to Iraqi civilians, arranging medical and dental care at schools and mosques, providing blanket and winter coat drop-offs for children and adults."

But then, in early June 2006, less than four months after he had first arrived in Iraq, Thach was riding with three American soldiers and one Iraqi civilian interpreter in his Humvee in the dirt roads in the back sections of Baghdad when the vehicle exploded while driving over a terrorist-planted IED. The strength of that explosion lifted the Humvee more than two yards off the ground and set off a gut-wrenching smoke reportedly seen from miles away.

Recalling that day, Thach stated, "It was a horrible shock. Such an explosion leaves you at first not knowing what hit you. We were all injured and in pain, but we were Infantry soldiers, riding in an armored-up Humvee made to take such a heavy hit. Because of that and with the help of God, we all survived."

"Later that day," he continued, "I told the medic treating me that I had a headache, some pain and was nauseous. He told me to take some aspirin and get some rest. I did and was back to fight the war the next day."

Seven months later, in the first week of February 2007, just one month shy of his completion of his first year of service in Iraq,



General David Petraeus (left) congratulates Captain James Van Thach for completing the task of establishing Combat Outpost Shocker in Iraq, November 2007.

learned to be 12-foot-long enemy Katyusha rockets. One rocket landed 20 meters from where I was standing, blowing me unconscious to the ground ... The next thing I remember, I woke up in an Army Hospital in Baghdad."

Thach stayed in that hospital for only one day. The following day he was flown 300 miles to a medical center in Balad Air base in northern Iraq. The doctors there informed him that their plan was to stabilize his injuries and then have him transported to an Army hospital in Landstuhl, Germany, where, they told him, his injuries could be most effectively treated.

But Thach didn't want to accept that plan. "That hospital is primarily for soldiers who have sustained the most severe injuries," he explained. "I looked in the mirror and saw that I while I was in pain, I still had my four limbs. Flying in the same plane to arrive in the same hospital with American soldiers missing arms, missing legs, lying unconscious would be to dishonor their sacrifice to our nation, I believed."

beyond all reasonable belief, just after one week that he suffered that second injury, was assigned in his new modified duty role to help coordinate from his office in a military base in Baghdad the building of a new fort several miles east, Combat Outpost (COP) Shocker. For his work in help constructing COP Shocker, which was built as an outpost used to stop the flow of weapons supplied by Iran to Iraqi terrorists to attack American soldiers and to Hezbollah to attack Israel, he was awarded the Joint Service Achievement Medal and later met and was congratulated for this service by General David Petraeus.

"This award and the congratulations I received from General Petraeus made me feel very proud," he said. "I was helping save American lives and also assisting our great ally, Israel."

During the entire time that COP Shocker was being built, Thach was enduring severe pain in his neck, head and back from those two attacks but was able to cope with it by taking the morphine his doctors had prescribed. But those injuries were eventually to catch up with him. As Thach described his ordeal, "I returned to Fort Benning [Georgia] in the middle of April 2008 as scheduled ... [While there] I felt the pain in my neck and back worsening every day; I was also experiencing terrible migraine headaches. The morphine was no longer able to control all the pain. ... The migraines were also causing me to have problems with my vision. ... And I was continuing to have nightmares about those two

continued on page 24

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor thanks Thach for his military service in Iraq and Afghanistan at Touro Law School in September 2013.

"There were threats against my fellow Americans of the Jewish faith," said Thach. "So I volunteered to patrol, after my law school classes ended during the week and on weekends, the numerous areas within the 105th precinct containing various possible Jewish targets of terrorists."

These potential targets included Jewish Community Centers, synagogues, yeshivas and cemeteries, most prominently Montefiore Cemetery, which contains the remains of the renowned Rabbi

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Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

With many of the officers of the 105th precinct temporarily redeployed to Ground Zero, Thach said his job was to "be the eyes and ears of the police. I did not have a firearm. But I did have my radio, baton and, if necessary, my body to sacrifice to protect the Jewish community."

Thach suffered a second injury, this one far more severe than the first. That cold February day was, at first, an uneventful one. "I was walking with my Iraqi counterpart," Thach recalled, "discussing some routine military matters ... Then suddenly I heard the sound of the explosion of what I later

Acting very quickly, Thach found a sympathetic member of the medical staff. She recommended that Thach be allowed to return to Baghdad in modified desk duty and have his injuries treated there.

This recommendation was approved by the military command, and Thach, seemingly



John's University, was commissioned a lieutenant in 1998. In 2002, because he had a law degree, the Army offered Thach the position of attorney within the Army's legal division.

Thach, however, instead chose to volunteer to go to Iraq to serve in the role of an Infantry Officer Military Advisor to the Iraqi Army's combat forces in the war-torn streets of Baghdad. I asked him to explain why he had made that choice when I had the great honor of interviewing the 38-year-old Flushing, Queens native, who wore on the outside of his white army uniform the medals of the Bronze Star and Purple Heart he had been awarded for his service to his nation from the Army.

"It goes back to 9/11," Thach said. "I was in my house studying for my law school classes ... I turned on

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continued from page 19

attacks that made it very hard for me to sleep. After six weeks of this, I realized I couldn't fight it alone any longer. ... I went to the hospital and wound up staying there for two months. I went through many tests and regular sessions of physical therapy. But there was no cure for my injuries. In March 2009, I was medically retired from the Army. The military had become my life. I was shattered."

Thach's physical and mental condition continued to worsen after his retirement. He needed a cane to walk. He was unable to drive a car or even bend down to put on his socks. His vision was impaired. He encountered difficulty sleeping and became, at times, possessed with thoughts of suicide. The side effects of the 20 pills he was taking to fight this physical and mental pain were wreaking havoc on his body and mind.

But Thach — whose American father while serving as a combat officer in Vietnam in the early 1970s met, married and took back to America the native Vietnamese woman who was later to bear him — was eventually able to find the help, support and inner strength that enabled him to survive and

move forward with his life. "I realized that the people who could help me most were those I was living closest to. ... I turned back to my mother and father for help and

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accepted their unconditional love and support," he said.

And then Thach mentioned Liz, the labrador retriever he was given as a gift by the Wounded Veteran

Initiative of Canine Companions for Independence (CCI). "Liz does so many chores for me," said Thach, "including when I accidentally drop my pills on the floor, she'll pick them up. And yes, the value of the love and kindness that she shows every day can never adequately be put into words."

There is an ancillary benefit that Liz provides that Thach, whose memory loss resulting from his injuries prohibits him from seeking employment in the legal field, was later to get to. "I spend much of my time engaged in several programs that benefit wounded warriors One of them was Operation Proper Exit, where last year I went to Afghanistan with eight other wounded veterans on a government-sponsored trip to speak to hundreds of service men and women concerning how to cope with mental and physical combat injuries. And another important program I am involved with is CCI Liz showed me how important a role a service dog can play in the lives of wounded warriors, [so] I am volunteering with CCI to help supply trained service dogs to wounded veterans across America. ... I have learned that helping my fellow wounded veterans has given me extra strength and created additional purpose to my life."

Robert Golomb is a nationally published columnist.

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