

HEROES

In the War on Terror

Each week the Defense Dept. highlights the military men and women who have gone above and beyond in the global war on terror.



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Marine Corps Maj. Armando Espinoza

The opening phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom in March and April of 2003 will go down as one of the most impressive advances in military history. So impressive, in fact, that it is easy to forget how heated some of the battles were, and how hard some of Saddam Hussein's forces fought.

On April 9, 2003, the 5th Marines took control of one of Saddam's palaces in Baghdad. Fedayeen fighters in the area refused to give up the fight and continued to launch offensives. The battle continued through the night and into the next morning – at which point then-Capt. Espinoza and his team were called in to evacuate the casualties.

As Espinoza's team flew over the Tigris River toward the palace, they began receiving small-arms and RPG fire. Espinoza and his wingman maneuvered through the attacks and approached a seemingly impossible landing zone: There was only room for one helicopter to land beside a swimming pool surrounded by large palm trees. Espinoza put his helicopter down amidst sniper shots from the rooftop and small-arms fire from numerous other directions. His corpsman quickly identified four injured Marines and loaded them onto the helicopter. After stabilizing them, Espinoza started the flight back to the casualty point, ordering his gunners to fire back at the enemy as he weaved through a maze of gunfire.

Four more times that day, Espinoza and his team returned to retrieve wounded Marines. He dodged bullets, landed under enemy fire, and his gunners helped suppress the large enemy attack. That night his team also ran a re-supply mission, dropping off much-needed ammunition, water, and equipment to Marines on the ground. On his final trip, Espinoza and his team returned to the combat zone to evacuate Iraqi civilians caught in the line of fire.

At the end of the long and weary battle, Espinoza's team had safely evacuated 28 Marines and a family of seven Iraqis. For his leadership and actions, Espinoza was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross on Feb. 25, 2005. Marine Corps [story](#).

Air Force Staff Sgt. Edward B. Albietz

Staff Sgt. Albietz's job often sounds more like the script from an episode of *24* than the everyday occurrence that it is: Rush into enemy territory, oftentimes under fire, locate bombs, and defuse them before they can go off and harm troops or civilians.

Albietz was the leader of an explosives team at Kirkuk Regional Air Base in Iraq, and was tasked with locating and disarming or destroying homemade bombs throughout a 42,000-square-kilometer area. As a result, Albietz was often caught in dangerous situations, with insurgent attacks always looming. In total, he was involved in more than 110 combat missions.

In one such mission, Albietz and his team were called in to disarm a bomb that was blocking a logistical convoy trying to pass through the area. As the enemy fired from multiple locations, Albietz's team successfully disabled the bomb. In a different mission, his team was sent to the city of Sulayman Bak to look for four pressure-switch-activated bombs that were hidden within a six-block area. Insurgents were trying to blow up Iraqi security and government buildings, but Albietz and his team of experts located each explosive and defused them before any harm could be done.

During his time in Iraq, Albietz contributed to the recovery and destruction of more than 40,000 explosives, most of which were roadside bombs of the type that have inflicted numerous casualties on Coalition forces.

For his work and leadership, Albietz received the Bronze Star on March 2, 2007. Pinellas Park Beacon [story](#).



Tucson, Ariz.
Distinguished Flying Cross recipient



Pinellas Park, Fla.
Bronze Star recipient