



SERGEANT RICHARD GERBETH, JR.

UNITED STATES NAVY UNITED STATES ARMY

GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR

Operation Iraqi Freedom

Richard R Gerbeth, Jr. was born November 18, 1972 in the Bronx. He grew up in Lake Carmel in Putnam County, New York. Both of Richard's parents were teachers, and his father was a Navy Vietnam War era veteran. He had a happy childhood, participating in karate and sports such as baseball and soccer. He wanted to play football in high school, but his parents thought the sport was too dangerous. From a young age, Richard knew that he wanted to follow in the footsteps of his father, and to enlist in the service.

In January 1991 Richard joined the United States Navy, where he was a radioman on board the USS Cleveland. He served in the Persian Gulf War for one year, before being honorably discharged for medical reasons. After attending Westchester College thanks to the G.I. Bill, Gerbeth was hired by the United Parcel Service and began working two part time jobs to support his family. Eventually his position was made full time, driving a UPS delivery truck.

In April 1999 he joined the New York Army Reserve National Guard and volunteered for the Infantry. Since he had already completed basic training through the Navy, he did not have to attend the Basic Combat Training for the Army. He was immediately shipped to California to attend Army Infantry Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) School.

Following Army Infantry MOS, he was activated for state missions throughout New York before and after September 11th, 2001. Richard's National Guard Unit Alpha Company Task Force 2nd Battalion-108th Infantry Regiment was mobilized October 1, 2003, and attached to the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. They reported to Fort Drum for training for 5 ½ months. He recalls Fort Drum as being very cold, which was ironic, since



they were training for the deserts in the Middle East.

In Iraq, Specialist Gerbeth served as a Fire Team leader in the Sunni Triangle from February through December 2004. "Being in the Infantry, your job is to close in on the enemy and kill or capture him. Most of our missions were in the nature of planned ambushes or raids on enemy towns or villages, where there was a high value target with a specific goal. The plan was to raid the house, capture the target, and seize assets."

Those were the missions he enjoyed, as the planning and focus gave them the tactical advantage. On other assignments, in different circumstances, the tables were often turned. Here the task was more daunting, the tension higher as the danger increased and the outcomes were less predictable. On these jobs, such as road clearance and checkpoints, there was no defined target. Here the enemy was invisible, often in hiding along rubble-strewn roads where they planted explosives and planned ambushes. Sergeant Gerbeth's platoon often had to escort bomb detonation experts to sites where hidden explosives were suspected. Accompanying the Explosive Ordinance Disposal Team was never a relaxing assignment. "We had to transport them through dangerous situations where you were always on the look-out."

On September 18, 2004 Sergeant Gerbeth and his squad were on night patrol, accompanying a team of snipers. They were equipped with night vision goggles. "Our snipers spotted insurgents planting

bombs along the road. My squad of five guys began moving into an ambush position to get the drop on them. We could see them moving in a line along the road, rather quickly. Our lieutenant said ‘Follow me’. We ran up the road then crept within forty meters of them. Our lieutenant verified an RPG in their hands. They were now standing in a circle. He gave us the order to fire.”

The enemy returned fire. “But at this point my weapon misfired.” While his buddy covered him, Richard cleared his weapon, while the lieutenant and a sergeant tossed hand grenades. Still under enemy fire, his lieutenant slipped and fell into a canal of water. “We all maneuvered under fire to a position around the lieutenant. We pulled him out of the water. I was RTO (Radio Telephone Operator) and I called in for infrared illumination to find the enemy.

I covered the lieutenant while three other guys pursued the enemy and captured two of them.” It was at this point that Gerbeth began to experience the symptoms of combat stress and fatigue. He found he had trouble sleeping and was aware of a heightened nervousness.

Sergeant Gerbeth had made a close friend, Specialist Segun Akintade. Born in Nigeria, he had come to the United States in the 1990’s. After attending college, he joined the National Guard, inspired by a deep sense of love for his new country. It was on September 11, 2001 that Segun began his first day of Basic Combat Training. Following that, he was mobilized, and served in Bravo Company 1st Battalion 105th Infantry, before transferring to Alpha Company, 2nd Battalion, 108th Infantry. It was here that Specialist Akintade met Sergeant Gerbeth.

Sergeant Gerbeth had a family by that point, while Segun was still unmarried. The two often spent time together in between missions, talking about each other’s lives and sharing experiences.

On October 28 2004, Specialist Akintade was riding to base in the truck in front of Sergeant Gerbeth, as part of a convoy, when the truck that Segun was riding in struck an IED. The convoy found itself in an ambush. Gerbeth and a Combat Life Saver ran from their vehicle to the truck. Under heavy fire the CLS and a medic tried to save Segun, who had been hit by shrapnel, but in vain. His wounds were too severe.

His family requested that Segun be buried in the United

States. He was laid to rest in a military cemetery on Long Island, where his family resides. Segun Akintade received the Purple Heart, and the Bronze Star.

Sergeant Gerbeth began seeing a combat control stress team, yet he still fought to stay in Iraq. He was forced to change platoons in order to see the psychologist. On November 16, 2004, during Operation Duke Fury at the height of the violent insurgency, Sergeant Gerbeth found himself running a traffic control checkpoint in Mushada near the ancient city of Fallujah some forty miles west of Baghdad, where U.S. forces were engaged in fierce fighting to rid the area of insurgents. Without warning a volley of Rocket-Propelled Grenades rained down nearby, striking the oil refinery. Gerbeth and the medic, Mike, turned and made for the Humvee.

At that moment there was an “incredibly loud, deafening blast....” A mortar had landed just behind them and exploded. “I went blind for a few seconds...when I came to I couldn’t hear anything, it was like time stood still. I didn’t realize what had happened, I started looking around but everything was blurry...I saw Joe the First Sergeant moving his hand, looking like a film in slow motion.” Although still dazed, suffering from a concussion, he instinctively went for the Humvee when another mortar hit the ground near him.

Shrapnel went flying into the door of the Humvee. Somehow they reached the Humvee and Mike got behind the wheel and they took off. They drove to their “rally point,” the pre-arranged location where they were to meet in the event of an attack.

For weeks on end he battled through severe headaches and acute dizziness. He lost all sense of balance, and couldn’t walk straight

for weeks. Sergeant Gerbeth had a difficult time reading, and he continues to have poor short-term memory. A year after his release from active duty, he was honorably discharged in April 2006. He returned to his civilian job as a teamster, but found he was unable to perform his duties due to his injuries he had suffered and their lasting effects. He retired early after an 18-year career.

Sergeant Gerbeth received the Purple Heart on May 28, 2012, from his former commanding officer, at the National Purple Heart Hall of Honor, in New Windsor New York, in a special ceremony commemorating the 80th anniversary of Temple



Hill Day and the inauguration of the Purple Heart award in its present form. The ceremony was conducted less than one hundred feet away from the Temple of Virtue, erected by General George Washington for his officers and men on the grounds of the last encampment of the Continental Army after the surrender of Cornwallis following the Battle of Yorktown in October 1781. It was in Newburgh, near these grounds, two hundred and thirty years earlier that Washington awarded the first three Badges of Military Merit, the forerunner of the Purple Heart, in 1783.

Sergeant Gerbeth continues to suffer the pain of his traumatic experiences, but he has mostly gotten used to the effects. He described it as a “long road, and a difficult transition. You have to learn to be a new person.” He regrets that Post Traumatic Stress is not yet widely understood. “You can’t know what it is unless you have it. . . . You really don’t feel the stress as much when it happens to you. But when your buddies are hit, that’s when it hits you the hardest.”

Sergeant Gerbeth joined the Military Order of the Purple Heart Chapter 21 and is an active life member. His positive attitude and devotion to promoting the mission of the MOPH resulted in his election as the Chapter 21 Sergeant-at-Arms. At the May 2012 Department Convention, he was elected Sergeant-at-Arms at the Department level, and was also appointed Chief of Staff. He served as the National Assistant Sergeant-at-Arms in 2014. At the 2013 election Gerbeth became the Department of New York Junior Vice-Commander,

a position at which he serves his fellow veterans with pride and honor. He has since transferred to Chapter 1782, where he now serves as Commander.

Chapter 1782 meets every month in Newburgh, New York at Washington’s Headquarters, where, in the rambling Dutch stone farmhouse overlooking the Hudson River, the General and future first President of the new United States of America designed with his own hand the Badge of Military Merit.

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Richard Gerbeth also has the honor to serve on the Veterans Advisory Board, formed by Congressman Sean Patrick Maloney, son of a U.S. Navy veteran and strong advocate for veterans’ rights. He is also a volunteer at his local Veterans Administration Hospital and has a trained therapy dog he brings on

visits to the Castle Point Veterans Hospital every week to raise the spirits of the hospitalized veterans there. In addition, Sergeant-at-Arms Gerbeth is active in fundraising for various projects relating to the MOPH and hosting parties for hospitalized veterans.

In addition to the MOPH membership he is a life member of the VFW, and the DAV (Disabled American Veterans). He is also a member of the American Legion. Gerbeth spends his free moments enjoying quality time with his wife Jessica and four children Garrett, Ann, Derek, and Noelle, leading his youngest son’s Cub Scout Den, motorcycling, and continuing to strive to improve the lives of veterans in need in every way he can.