WE WERE SOLDIERS: HEROES ALL, PATHFINDERS FOREVER

THE AMERICAN LEGION RECENTLY SENT THE EDITOR OF ITS MAGAZINE TO IRAQ. THIS IS THE FIRST OF A SERIES OF REPORTS FROM THE FRONTLINES

By John Raughter

Sgt. James J. Holtom, Sgt. Ross A. Clevenger and Private First Class Raymond Werener were recently remembered by their comrades during a memorial service in Iraq.

Photos: John Raughter

AR RAMADI, IRAQ -- In war, it is said that tragic events happen in threes. But sometimes one horrible event is magnified by three. Such is the case of three young Idahoans who were all born in 1985, all loved their country and all served together with the same U.S. Army Reserve unit in Iraq. They all died together.

Sgt. James J. Holtom, Sgt. Ross A. Clevenger and Private First Class Raymond M. Werner were clearing routes so that others could safely travel the rough roads around Fallujah. On Feb. 8, 2007, an Improvised Explosive Device detonated on the armored vehicle that the brave pathfinders were riding. Such is the risk for those on Team Badger.

"It only hurts so much because we love them so much. Badger forward!" Capt. Eric Coulson, Commanding Officer of Company A., 321st Engineer Battalion said at a memorial service held in Ramadi on Feb. 13.

It is clear the men were loved by those they served with, but the loss was perhaps most felt by Staff Sgt. Brandie Brown. Brown met Clev-

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Sgt. Brandie Brown, who was engaged to Sgt. Clevenger, is comforted by a fellow soldier.

enger in January 2006 and became engaged to him in September.

"He was just the most lovable, funniest, clumsiest person you would ever meet. He adored his family, friends and put everybody first," she said. Brown clutched a miniature stuffed moose as she wept through the memorial service. "I bought this at a U.S.O., she said of the stuffed animal. "I bought this for him to take in his vehicle to keep him safe on his missions. He had bought me one too."

Clevenger was a fan of Bigfoot, friend Amie Vanek remembered on a Web site. "It's hard to pick out one memory of Ross, he was a guy so unique every time you talked to him was a memory. What comes to mind when I think about Ross would be his creativeness and unfailing belief in the unbelievable. Speech class in 10th would be the best example, when Ross did a speech on the existence of Bigfoot. The whole class was crying from laughter. He has been a hero of mine for awhile, now; I'm glad the world views him as one too."

Holtom, of Nampa, Idaho, was also engaged. The 22-year-old vehicle commander was the quietist of the trio, according to those in his unit. "He was efficient with his use of words in my presence," Coulson remembered. "He was the sort of NCO a commander counts on. He knew the status of his soldiers and weapons at all times."

Coffee-drinking was one of his passions."If you ever had a problem, Sgt. Holtom was always there to talk to," said Pfc. Phillip Kildow. "He would always listen with a cup of coffee in his hand. He loved coffee, had an espresso machine and made undoubtedly the best coffee in the unit. Sgt. Holtom was like a older brother to me. He was quiet, but when you got him going on something he could go for hours. I remembering being with Sgt. Holtom and the conversations we would have talking about everything from relationships, school, politics, life, the future. The encouragement that he gave me without saying a word. Just his presence was encouragement."

Holtom's enlistment in the Army came as a surprise to his family. "He never really talked to my parents about it," his brother Ben Holtom told Idaho television station KTVB. "He just came home one day and said he'd signed up for the Army, and he never really talked to them about it. My dad, he understood, but my mom didn't stop crying for three days. That's just what he wanted to do."

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A soldier salutes memorials to three fallen soldiers from the 321st Engineer Battalion who made the ultimate sacrifice in Iraq.

Werner was known for his smile and his wit. "He had such a way with people and he was always making everybody around him laugh. It didn't even have to be that funny, just listening to that guy made you smile," Spc. Justin Volle said. The 2004 graduate of Cole Valley Christian School in Meridian, Idaho, leaves behind his wife, Lacey.

"I'm so sad we didn't get to have our married life together," Lacey Werner said at her husband's funeral in Treasure Valley, Idaho. Married just a few weeks before he left for his training and deployment, Lacey said her husband would call her nearly everyday from Iraq.

"We'd turn on the Web cam," she told the Idaho Press-Tribune. "He'd watch me put on my make-up. He'd have questions and comments. I'm so glad we had those mornings together. Not a day went by that I didn't say I was so proud of him. And he'd say, "No, Lacey, I'm proud of you."

Pride and sorrow dominated the atmosphere of the field memorial service. "These soldiers, day-in and day-out, cleared routes for others," said Col. Michael Hoxie, commander of Task Force Pathfinder. "They did it knowing the dangers and never saying no. Just the night before on 7 February, the soldiers of 3rd Platoon, Alpha Company, set out to perform a very important mission. That mission was to clear a path, to map out a route, leading a personnel recovery team to a helicopter crash site. On that mission, they successfully cleared several IEDs, allowing the recovery team to get to the site to bring home the remains of fellow warriors so that other families can grieve in peace. On 8 February, PFC Werner, Sgt. Holtom and Sgt. Clevenger died in the face of the enemy performing a mission they believed in and serving a country they loved. Now it's time for us to grieve, to mourn their loss and tomorrow we will go out again – but not alone. The spirit of these great men will be guiding us, leading us to victory and we will not fail them. We will honor their service and continue to fight. Sgt. Ross Clevenger, Sgt. James Holtom, PFC Ray Werner. These soldiers are and will always be pathfinders."

While the roads cleared by these men opened routes for many travelers, the soldiers of the 321st will always recognize the paths as passageways forged by heroes.

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