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# Purple-colored valor: No regrets for the 20-year war

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Zach Brackett's wife assembled a shadow box to hold his medal made with purple ribbon and an attached heart outlined in gold. Purple Hearts are presented to U.S. military men and women who were injured or died during service.

Brackett, a Blount County Sheriff's deputy, was awarded one after his guard tower in Afghanistan was destroyed by a suicide bomber in September 2013. A few months after the explosion, he returned to America after serving in the Army for a year and a half, spending nine of those months in Afghanistan.

Even though he sustained injuries from an attack claimed by the Taliban, and eight years later the same terrorist group overpowered the Afghan government, Brackett said America's time there wasn't in vain.

"I've heard a lot of people say it was for nothing," Brackett said, "and it was a slap in the face, 20 years, and then this is how it ended. And, you know, you could get caught up in that. But we did change people's lives for the better, and we helped people to the best that we could."

Brackett, 27, said he was deployed to Afghanistan with a mission for "district stabilization" in the Sar Hawza district of the Paktika province.

He said they were training Afghanistan's military and police to strengthen them against the Taliban.

"We gave Afghanistan all the tools to stand on their own," Brackett said. "Ultimately, you know, it was up to Afghanistan to save Afghanistan. ... I don't know that it could have been done any better, any different. Everybody's got their opinions about it."

Repeating history

Regardless of when the military pulled out, Brackett said, he thinks it was inevitable that the Afghan government would fall, like what happened in Iraq, he said.

In 2011, American soldiers withdrew from Iraq, an article from the U.S. Institute of

Peace states, with the understanding that the Iraqi government would close the partisan divide that led to the growth of ISIS. Their government didn't effectively follow through, it stated, and by September 2013, ISIS had taken over two major cities in Iraq and continued to expand their control.

American soldiers were deployed to Iraq again by September 2014 to assist the Iraqi Army against ISIS.

Near the time ISIS started gaining more power in Iraq, a suicide car bomber blew up Brackett's guard tower in Sar Hawza, Afghanistan, on Sept. 13, 2013.

Reporting from CNN said that on the same day, multiple attacks were launched across Afghanistan - one in Paktika, where Brackett was, and another at the U.S. consulate in Herat, 400 miles away.

In Herat, CNN said, seven Taliban members fired assault rifles from two vehicles. All seven attackers were killed, along with three Afghan civilians, two Afghan police officers and one Afghan security guard. Twenty others were injured.

In Paktika, CNN said, dozens of Afghans died in the suicide bombing. The U.S. avoided - barely - suffering any casualties.

Surviving the bombing

"By the mercy of God, I'm still here, because I was the worst one," Brackett said. "There was 1,000 ways I should have died and none that I should've lived. But somehow I did."

Two days before the attack, he said, they were on lockdown, expecting the enemy to make a statement on Sept. 11. It was quiet for the four months he had been stationed there.

"Turned out they were watching us and seeing that we'd beefed up the security," Brackett said. "So, they waited for two days and then hit us."

The explosion was about 40 meters away from his guard tower and blew him off his feet and to the back of the building, about 10 feet to the ground, where he landed on his back.

"There for a solid 30 seconds," Brackett said, "I thought I'd like, legitimately thought, I'd died."

He remembers the mushroom cloud of dirt, not really being able to hear for three days and that birds within a quarter-mile radius dropped dead from the explosion.

A large piece of shrapnel punctured Brackett's right calf, a smaller piece through his nose and another just barely under his left eye. Six of his vertebrae were damaged. He said he walked a little more than half a football field after the explosion, on pure adrenaline, to get back to the base.

After spending time in the hospital healing, he went back to another base in Afghanistan

and said they were getting attacked two or three times every day.

“As smart as I was at 19 years old,” Brackett said, “I had to go back because I just couldn’t stand it, and once I was able to walk without crutches, they did let me go back.”

He stayed at the other base for about a month, until his right calf got so infected that the doctors said it would need to be amputated if the antibiotics didn’t start working. After another month and a half in a hospital, he said, he came back to the U.S. in May 2015.

Three years later, he joined Blount County Sheriff’s Office.

“I just missed the relationships from the military and all my buddies basically became cops too,” Brackett said. “Getting to help people, and a lot of it is just the bond that you make.”

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