



Army Reserve Troops Awarded For Heroics

By Marni McEntee, [Stars and Stripes](#), European Edition, February 9, 2004

BAGHDAD — The SUV hit a wall because the driver was dead, shot in the head by a sniper. An AK-47 round pierced the passenger side door and gouged a chunk out of **Chief Warrant Officer 3 Robert Meyerhoff's** right calf. Bullets were pinging into the truck from two or three directions. *Meyerhoff* was wearing his new vest with honest to God bulletproof plates for the first time that day. He turned to face his attackers and put the plates to the test. "I thought, let's see if this thing really works," said *Meyerhoff*, 55, of Valle Crucis, N.C.

On that Sept. 3 morning, *Meyerhoff*, Capt. Juan David Pena, Spc. Travis Duarte and civilian Vernon Gaston were driving on a highway south of Baghdad to Babylon, scouting out a route for military mail convoys. The Army Reserve troops with the 461st Personnel Services Battalion out of Decatur, Ga., mapped out routes all over Iraq. Gaston, the driver, was a Kellogg Brown & Root contractor. "Our No. 1 priority is making sure the mail goes to the Army post offices in the safest manner," Pena said. The ambush, however, proved that mail carriers in Iraq face deadly threats to get troops their letters and packages.

For their performance that day, Pena, Meyerhoff and Duarte will receive the Bronze Star with the "V" device for valor. Meyerhoff was awarded the Purple Heart in December. Pena remembers that day clearly — though dreams of the attack don't plague him anymore.

Gaston, 46, of Lampasas, Texas, was just about to make a U-turn when the shooting started from one of the roadside warehouses, another vehicle and a crossroad. "It was pretty intense," said Pena, 43, of Atlanta, who was sitting in the rear seat. "Rounds were going in and out of the vehicle." "I shouted 'Step on it! Let's get out of here!'" Pena said. Gaston floored it. The truck crossed a berm at the road's edge, and, with the truck still rolling, the three soldiers jumped out and fired at their attackers — Pena and *Meyerhoff* with M-16s and Duarte, who had ducked into a drainage ditch, with a squad automatic weapon. The vehicle continued about 100 meters until it hit the wall.

It was so chaotic, *Meyerhoff* said, that he only focused on surviving. For a moment, he thought about his wife, Mona. "I thought 'Am I gonna make it?'" *Meyerhoff* said. "Sorry, babe." His calf streaming blood, *Meyerhoff* dragged himself across an open field toward the crashed SUV. Pena helped *Meyerhoff*, vice president of operations for a small company back home, make it the last few meters.

They checked on Gaston. The bullet had pierced his temple, just below where his Kevlar helmet sat. Pena, whose helmet had been torn off, bloodying his nose with the chinstrap, put on Gaston's helmet. Sporadic gunfire continued and Pena and Duarte returned fire.

Meyerhoff, who served in Vietnam as a Marine Corps rifleman, slumped next to the wall. He used the field dressing in his chest pocket to bandage his calf. Pena ran back across the field and tried to flag down cars, but nobody would stop. So he stood in the road and aimed his M-16 at them. He quickly commandeered a cargo van with two scared Iraqi teens inside. While *Meyerhoff* continued to shoot at the attackers, Pena and Duarte drove across the field and picked up Gaston. Then Pena drove the van against traffic down the freeway for about a mile. At the 407th Forward Support Battalion's camp, a field surgeon cauterized the artery in *Meyerhoff's* calf. The next day, he was flown to the 28th Combat Support Hospital in Baghdad.

While there, he got to shake hands with *Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld*, who was touring the hospital. "He leaned over and whispered to me, 'Did you get the bad guy?'" *Meyerhoff* said. *Meyerhoff* said later that he'll never know if any of his bullets met their mark. At Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, a plastic surgeon pieced his calf back together. A thin, red scar is the only visible trace of the battle.

Pena and *Meyerhoff* still manage the joint military mail terminal at Baghdad International Airport. Duarte returned home to the United States. *Meyerhoff* said he was just doing his job when the ambush happened. His Purple Heart is back home with his family. "Unfortunately, I was a target that day, but I feel proud," *Meyerhoff* said.

"I don't feel like a hero," said Pena, who runs a car service center in Atlanta. "The medal is something my kids and grandkids will be able to see. I owe my life to Vern [Gaston], because he took me out of the kill zone." "And just looking at the chief [*Meyerhoff*] gave me the courage to push on. That's who the real heroes are."

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