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News

Portraits of Navy SEALs killed in helicopter crash

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By The Associated Press

The Navy SEALs who died aboard a downed helicopter in Afghanistan came to the special forces from far-flung corners of the country, some motivated by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. They were intensely patriotic and talented young men with a love of physical challenges and a passion for the high-risk job they chose.

Thirty Americans — 22 of them SEALs — and eight Afghans were killed Saturday when a rocket-propelled grenade fired by a Taliban insurgent downed their Chinook helicopter en route to a combat mission. All but two of the SEALs were from SEAL Team 6, the unit that killed Osama bin Laden, although military officials said none of the crash victims was on that mission in Pakistan against the al-Qaida leader.

The Pentagon has not yet identified the victims of the crash, but family members and friends have spoken to The Associated Press and other media outlets about them.

Here are the stories of some of the fallen:

Matthew Mason

A severe arm injury during fighting in Fallujah in 2004 didn't keep Matthew Mason off the Iraq War battlefield. Nor did it dull the competitive fire of the avid runner and former high school athlete from outside Kansas City.

Within five months of losing part of his left arm, absorbing shrapnel and suffering a collapsed lung, Mason competed in a triathlon. He soon returned to his SEAL unit.

"He could have gotten out of combat," said family friend Elizabeth Frogge. "He just insisted on going back."

Mason, the father of two toddler sons, grew up in Holt, Mo., and played football and baseball at Kearney High School. He graduated from Northwest Missouri State University in 1998. His wife, who is expecting their third child — another boy — also attended Northwest Missouri.

Mason returned to Missouri in May to compete in a Kansas City triathlon, and took his family to Walt Disney World for the first time this summer, Frogge said.

"He loved doing what he did," she said. "He was the type of guy who thought he was invincible."

Jason Workman

Jason Workman had his sights set on becoming a SEAL as a young teenager. He was about 14 when his older brother graduated from West Point. That's when he knew he wanted to be an elite soldier, friend Tate Bennett told The Deseret

News. Then came the Sept. 11 terror attacks, and Workman's calling grew even stronger.

"He didn't become a Navy SEAL by chance," Bennett said. "He knew that's what he wanted at a young age and made it happen."

After returning from his Mormon mission, Bennett said, Workman went to Southern Utah University and later joined the Navy.

Across his small hometown of Blanding in southern Utah, flags were flown at half-staff as residents mourned the loss of one of their own.

Even as a SEAL, Workman came home periodically. During his last trip, he led training sessions with local law enforcement, sharing his military skills, and planned to provide more training during a trip home this fall, Mayor Toni Turk told the Salt Lake City Tribune.

Jon Tumilson

Jon Tumilson got an early start on his preparation to join the SEALs. He had been a wrestler in high school and competed in marathons and triathlons.

Neighbors remembered the Rockford, Iowa, man as a warrior committed to the SEALs, no matter the pain he endured in training or the risks he ran on each mission.

"When he did something, he put his all into it," Jan Stowe, a neighbor of the Tumilsons for more than 30 years, told the Des Moines Register.

Tumilson, who was 35 when he died, "was going to be a Navy SEAL since I can't remember when," Stowe said. "He's like a hero to everyone here."

Another neighbor, Mark Biggs, said people were shocked by his death.

"You just never thought it would happen to Jon," Biggs told the Mason City Globe Gazette. "He's done so many dangerous things."

Friend Justin Schriever remembered Tumilson as "a die-hard at everything. He'd always go the extra mile on everything. He wouldn't let anything stop him from accomplishing something."

Brian Bill

Brian Bill had plans for when he finished his military service. He wanted to return to graduate school and hoped one day to become an astronaut.

For those who knew him, such lofty goals were not out of reach.

"He set his standards high. He was that kind of person," Kimberly Hess, a friend who graduated with him in 2001 from Vermont's Norwich University, told The Advocate newspaper. "He was remarkably gifted and very thoughtful. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do for you no matter the time or day."

Diane Warzoha, who had Bill as a student at Trinity Catholic High School in Stamford, said it was no surprise that he fulfilled his goal of joining the SEALs.

"Brian just wanted to do his best, to protect other people ... Challenge did not deter him, ever."

Spc. Spencer Duncan, Chief Warrant Officer 2 Bryan Nichols, Specialist Alexander Bennett

Three of the crew members aboard the downed Chinook were from the same Army reserve unit — Bravo Company, 7th Battalion, 158th Aviation Regiment — based at New Century AirCenter in Gardner, Kan.

Spc. Spencer Duncan, 21, of Olathe, Kan., had written to friends about how much he loved working as a door gunner on a Chinook helicopter. But The Kansas City Star reported that he also told friends that he missed Kansas sunsets and lying in a truck bed listening to the radio and cuddling with his sweetie.

He joined the military in 2008 and had been in Afghanistan since late May.

Chief Warrant Officer 2 Bryan Nichols, 31, a pilot from Kansas City, Mo., was eager to get back to flying after a stint handling paperwork as a unit administrator. So when the word went out that people were needed to train for a mobilization, Nichols volunteered.

Lt. Col. Richard Sherman, former commander of Nichols' unit, said one of his favorite memories is flying a pace car with Nichols to the Texas Motor Speedway in Fort Worth, Texas.

"My happiest and saddest memories are now tied to him," said Sherman, who was in command and working as an instructional pilot when Nichols joined his unit.

"He had no enemies. He was one everyone wanted to be around. You just liked flying with him because you knew he was going to improve as a young pilot and get better every time you flew with him."

Specialist Alexander Bennett, 23, couldn't wait to deploy again after returning from spending a year in Iraq in 2009. So the reservist moved on his own from the Tacoma, Wash., area to Overland Park, Kan., to join Bravo Company.

"He wanted to be part of our unit when it deployed," said Sherman. "He was a typical young kid and liked to go out and have a good time with the guys."

Sgt. Patrick Hamburger

Patrick Hamburger planned to propose to his girlfriend, but had a job to do first: a mission in Afghanistan.

The 30-year-old sergeant from Grand Island, Neb., joined the Nebraska National Guard when he was a senior at Lincoln Southeast High School, but this was his first deployment, his brother Chris Hamburger told The Associated Press.

"He didn't have to go, and he wanted to go because his group was getting deployed. He wanted to be there for them. That's him for you," Chris Hamburger said, adding that Patrick always looked out for his two younger brothers and friends.

He was also the kind of guy who helped his girlfriend raise her 13-year-old daughter from another relationship, as well as the couple's own 2-year-old daughter, and planned to propose marriage when he got home, Chris Hamburger said.

Patrick Hamburger had been in Afghanistan less than two weeks and had arrived at Forward Operating Base Shank a few days before climbing aboard the helicopter to rush to the aid of an Army Ranger unit under fire from insurgents.

"It doesn't come as a total surprise that he was trying to help people and that's how it all ended up happening," Chris Hamburger said.

Michael Strange

If someone was sad, Michael Strange tried to make them smile. He loved snowboarding, surfing, scuba diving, running, and shooting guns on the range.

"He loved his friends, his family, his country; he loved making people laugh. He was one of a kind," Strange's brother, Charles Strange III, said outside the family's Philadelphia home, where American flags were planted throughout the neighborhood.

Strange, 25, decided to join the military when he was still in high school, and had been in the Navy for about six years, first stationed in Hawaii and for the last two in Virginia Beach, where he became a SEAL about two years ago, his mother, Elizabeth Strange, told The Associated Press.

But he always told his family not to worry.

"He wasn't supposed to die this young. He was supposed to be safe," Elizabeth Strange said. "And he told me that, and I believed him. I shouldn't have believed him because I know better. He would say, 'Mom, don't be ridiculous and worry so much. I'm safe.'"

Charles Strange said his brother loved the SEALs, especially "the competitiveness, getting in shape and running and swimming and all of that."

He also had two sisters and recently became an uncle. The family last saw him in June, when he came for a weeklong visit for his birthday, his mother said. He was supposed to be back for Thanksgiving.

"It was going to be such a good time," his mother said.

His grandmother Bernice Strange remembered him as a young man who loved cheesesteaks and the Philadelphia Eagles and always brought her flowers.

"He was a wonderful grandson to have," she said Monday night. "God truly blessed me with him."

John Brown

If Elizabeth Newlun wanted to have a serious conversation with her son, John Brown, she had to shoot baskets with him.

"There's nothing athletic about me, but I realized that you have to get into other people's comfort zone to get information," said Newlun, of Rogers, Ark., explaining that her son, an Air Force technical sergeant, was a "gentle giant" who "just loved anything physical, anything athletic."

Newlun said her son played football and basketball in high school and went to John Brown University on a swimming scholarship. He had wanted to go into the medical field and become a nurse anesthetist, but decided to join the military after seeing a video of a special tactical unit, she said.

The airman was a paramedic and ready to attend to the medical needs of anyone who was rescued, his mother said.

Arkansas state Rep. Jon Woods went to high school with Brown in Siloam Springs and remembered playing basketball and watching "Saturday Night Live" on the weekends.

"When you think of what the ideal model of a soldier would be, he would be it," said Woods. "He could run all day."

Aaron Carson Vaughn

Aaron Carson Vaughn was a man of deep faith, insisting to his family that he didn't fear his job as a Navy SEAL "because he knew where he was going" when he died.

"Aaron was a Christian and he's with Jesus today," Geneva Vaughn of Union City, Tenn., told The Associated Press on Saturday. "He told us when we saw him last November that he wasn't afraid ... he said, 'Granny, don't worry about me.'"

"He was a tough warrior, but he was a gentle man."

Geneva Vaughn said her grandson, 30, joined the SEALs straight out of boot camp and was already a decorated fighter when he was asked by the Navy to return stateside to become an instructor. But he applied to SEAL Team 6 after two years, earning his way onto the squad in 2010.

He asked the military to return him to combat and shipped out just six weeks before he was killed, Vaughn said.

"He was doing what he loved to do and he was a true warrior," Geneva Vaughn said.

Aaron Vaughn leaves behind his wife, Kimberly, and two children, 2-year-old son Reagan and 2-month-old daughter Chamberlyn.

"They will take away his love for Christ. They will take his dream and his love for the country, and they will know what an amazing man he is," Kimberly said about the children in an interview on NBC's "Today" show Monday.

Robert James Reeves, Jonas Kelsall

Robert James Reeves and Jonas Kelsall had been childhood friends in Shreveport, La., where they played soccer together and graduated from Caddo Magnet High School, Kelsall's father, John, told The Times of Shreveport and KLSA-TV.

Both joined the military after graduation, though the 32-year-old Reeves spent a year at Louisiana State University first, his father, Jim Reeves, told the newspaper.

Reeves became a SEAL in 1999 and served on SEAL Team 6, his father said. During his many deployments, he earned four Bronze Stars and other honors.

Kelsall, 33, was one of the first members of SEAL Team 7, his father said.

He trained in San Diego and met his wife of three years, Victoria, when he was attending the University of Texas out of Basic Underwater Demolition training, his father said.

Reeves placed several American flags outside his home and his neighbors joined in, many decorating their homes in red, white and blue in support of the families.

Kraig Vickers

When he was a Maui High School football player, no one could match Kraig Vickers' intensity on the field.

But off the field? "You couldn't find a nicer guy," his former coach remembers.

"He played middle linebacker, so he was really smart, the quarterback of the defense; and when he put on his helmet, no one could match his intensity and aggressiveness," coach Curtis Lee told the Maui News.

Vickers, who would have turned 37 on Thursday, graduated from high school in 1992 and attended Evangel College in Missouri on a football scholarship. "He decided college wasn't for him," and returned home, his father, Robert Vickers, said. After stints in tree trimming and working as a hotel security guard, he became a certified scuba diver and decided to join the Navy in 1996.

He lived in Virginia Beach, Va., with his wife Nani, who is seven months' pregnant with their third child. Robert Vickers said she is making plans to return to Hawaii because she only has a small window of time before doctors won't allow her to fly.

"He wanted to be buried near the ocean," his father said, adding that the family is awaiting details on when the body will arrive on Maui.

Chris Campbell

Chris Campbell may have been physically slight, but family and friends said the Navy SEAL was always ready to take on a challenge.

His mother, Diane Campbell, told The Daily News of Jacksonville she remembered him and his older brother learning to ride a unicycle brought back from Okinawa as one example of her son's determination.

"If Chris thought he could, he would try," Diane Campbell said.

Former high school football coach Jack Baile remembered Campbell, 36, showing he was up to a test when he tried out for the team as a smallish junior at about 5 foot-7 and 140 pounds.

"When kids come out for football for the first time, the first thing you're worried about is, are they going to like to be hit, or want to be hit, and like to hit. That was not a problem with Chris. He had no fear with that," Baile told The Associated Press.

"I remember hearing for the first time when he had joined the SEALs, I thought that kind of fits Chris. He didn't have a lot of fear of things and I think he always wanted to try to prove to somebody that he could do things. He was an adventurous-type guy."

Campbell's work frequently sent him on missions out of the country, and his family asked few questions when he showed up with a full beard or arrived for a visit that could only last three hours. In an email to his daughter Samantha sent days before the crash, he wrote that he was looking forward to coming home in November and celebrating her 15th birthday in January.

Chris Campbell told his family that if he was killed in the line of duty, he wanted the local newspaper to write about his life and death, with a request for donations in his memory to the Wounded Warrior Project. The project helps wounded service members recover from their war injuries.

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