



CAPTAIN ROSS PIXLER UNITED STATES ARMY GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR Operation Iraqi Freedom

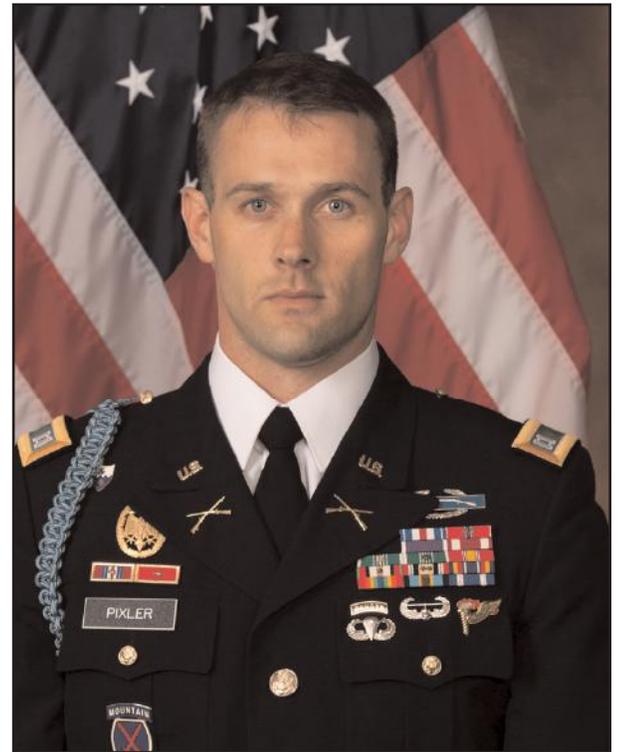
Ross Pixler was 18 years old when he saved his friend's life. The two were mountain climbing up Pico de Orizaba, a dormant volcano covered with glaciers, at 18,490 feet the third tallest mountain in North America. Far off the beaten path, they lost their way and spent three days and two nights in a remote area, when Ross' friend, a diabetic, could not walk any further and started to show symptoms of delirium.

Ross knew he had to get help for his friend. He managed to find his way back and retrieve help. He led the rescue party back to his friend, in time to save his life. This demonstration of self-reliance and confidence helped Ross get into West Point; and it foreshadowed his survival instincts that would come into play later in Iraq.

Ross Pixler was born on August 26, 1982 in Montrose, Colorado. When he was six years old, his family moved to Phoenix, Arizona. Ross was the youngest of three children. His father is a U.S. Attorney for Maricopa County and his mother works for the State of Arizona.

Ross grew up loving the outdoors. A Boy Scout, he enjoyed camping and mountain climbing. He completed his Eagle Scout project when he was only sixteen, earning the rank of Eagle Scout when he was seventeen. Always the adventure-seeker, he went in for scuba diving, martial arts, and participated in his high school JROTC program.

Ross, accepted into the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, studied very hard in an effort to excel. He admits he learned an important lesson in humility. "I was always an overachiever... as a cadet, I tried very hard, but I was only an average cadet.... That was a hard pill to take. Many of my other classmates were brilliant... Even so, Cadet Pixler graduated with a major in nuclear engineering. Ross played spring football, competed in Sandhurst and biathlons, instructed local children on the ski



slopes, excelled in martial arts and participated in scuba diving. He loved the discipline he learned from the academy.

Ross graduated from West Point as a 2nd lieutenant in 2005, and was married the next day. He was assigned to Fort Benning, Georgia for four years. He completed Army Airborne School and Army Ranger School ("the toughest combat course in the world") before deploying to Iraq as a platoon leader for Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 15 Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division.

In 2007, Lt. Pixler arrived with his unit in Salman Pak, Iraq. Located southeast of Baghdad and on the east side of the Tigris River, Salman Pak contains some of the oldest man-made structures ever built, including the great Ctesiphon Arch. The houses that the citizens were living in were made out of clay, baked in the sun to form adobe bricks. Outside the city, farmers led an agrarian lifestyle, deriving their methods from the ancient Mesopotamians. They used canals from the Tigris River to bring water to their fields. Although their farming methods were ancient, they found ways to successfully farm in such an arid and hot climate.

Lt. Pixler arrived in Iraq at the height of the insurgency. There was constant fighting between the American soldiers and the al-Qaeda insurgents, as the Americans fought to push them out of Salman Pak. Pixler and his men were to spend fifteen months in frequent contact with enemy insurgents.

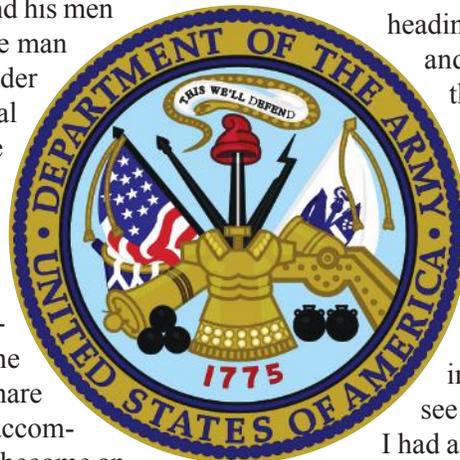
"On the average patrol, we would divide up our pla-



toon into two squads.... I would take one squad, the Platoon Sergeant would take the other.... We often had one Bradley, and two Humvees on patrol.” Lt. Pixler and his men would often visit local tribal leaders. One man in particular stood out, Sheik Ali, the leader of the Sons of Iraq, a populist Sunni tribal movement. At one time opposed to the American-led Allied Forces, Sheik Ali became a huge supporter of the American soldiers after they successfully began pushing back al-Qaeda. As the U.S. surge began forcing al-Qaeda out, the local people opened up more, often inviting the Americans into their homes to chat and share a cup of goat milk or chai tea. Usually accompanied by an interpreter, Lt. Pixler had to become an expert in reading body language and understanding cultural nuances.

As the Allied surge against the insurgency intensified in the closing months of 2007, Lieutenant Pixler and his men went after a multitude of high value targets. Pixler’s commanding officers trusted him to operate his missions successfully, and he often had large discretion in the planning and execution

of an assignment.



It was October 30, 2007. Lt. Pixler and his unit were heading out for a routine patrol. On such patrols and missions, the lieutenant always rode in the lead vehicle, where the risk and danger were most prevalent. October 30 was no exception. “I had a bad feeling about the mission. I had expressed concerns to my company commander, but was told that the mission had to go through, and to be careful.... There were six men in my vehicle. We were driving through five or six inches of moon dust. Although we didn’t see anything, I told the driver to slow down.

I had a bad feeling.... We hit a pressure plate, an IED buried deep underground. It was a fifty-five gallon drum filled with about four hundred fifty to six hundred pounds of homemade explosives. It crushed the Bradley, killing our three soldiers riding in the back. Our driver was thrown out of the vehicle. The driver and gunner both received severe injuries, which would ultimately cause them to be medically discharged from the Army.”

Pixler himself had a concussion and injuries to his arm, legs and feet. Yet, “I got out, assessed the situation... it was very difficult to see.... I called in for close combat air support... We were taking fire from a nearby house. The ongoing fire-fight ensued sporadically for several hours.... Eventually, a second platoon arrived and our commander helped us fight off the attacks. I had an Apache helicopter making gun runs.... A medic told me I had a concussion, and sent me into another Bradley going back to base.” Along the way, the vehicle struck another IED. “This one was not as effective as the first due to the slant of the terrain, so it only destroyed one side of the Bradley.” Unhurt from the second explosion, Lt. Pixler jumped into a third Bradley, eventually making it to an extraction point where he could be air-lifted to the hospital. Pixler would remain in the hospital for four days. He received his Purple Heart from a liaison officer.

Despite his injuries, Pixler insisted on finishing out the tour with his men. Leaving the hospital on his own initiative, without waiting for orders, he grabbed a uniform, without any insignia or rank, and made his way to the air base. He hooked up with a helicopter pilot, who offered to drop off Pixler by his base.

At 2:00 in the morning the pilot dropped off Lt. Pixler in the middle of an old Iraqi Republican Guard Tank range. Looking around, Pixler saw that, while he was indeed in the general area he wanted, his base was nowhere in sight. Without a weapon, compass, or body armor, the lieutenant relied on skills he had learned many years before as a Boy Scout. Using the Big Dipper to find Polaris, he began walking south for several miles, eventually seeing lights in the distance. Recalling that the friendly Iraqi base was located north of the American one, Pixler approached the fort.

The Iraqi guards challenged him, suspicious of the lone American emerging from the darkness of the desert wilderness. With guns drawn, the Iraqi soldiers took him into the fort, proceeding to question him for several hours. Satisfied with his story, they contacted the American base, which sent a vehicle to retrieve him.

Back on base Pixler realized that the fighting against the insurgents had escalated. “There were times when I was pretty sure that I would not live through the deployment. I didn’t want to [show] fear... as I felt that it could rub off on the soldiers.... But the situation did look pretty bleak. Over a third of my platoon had been wounded at some point during the deployment.” During December fighting took place every-



day for several hours between the American soldiers and the insurgents. “We would sometimes even run out of ammunition during the firefight, return to base to resupply, and head back out again.... The insurgents at this point were desperate, and they were trying to make one final push at our lines. But by December 22, the remaining insurgents had left. [During patrol that day,] the Iraqi citizens lined the streets, clapping, cheering, and holding their babies in the air as we rode past.”

“You can never change the past, yet the things you do today can inspire the choices you make tomorrow.”

Lieutenant Pixler finished out his tour in Iraq, coming home in May 2008. He completed a captain’s career course and earned the rank of captain. Assigned to Fort Drum, he would be sent out on two more deployments to Afghanistan. It was on his second tour in Afghanistan that he

received a call from West Point, asking him to return to teach cadets. His Brigade Commander informed him that, even if he were to choose to stay in Afghanistan, he would have to vacate his position as a company commander, as his allotted time was up. Reluctantly Captain Pixler agreed to cut short his tour and leave his soldiers, but happy to arrive back home to teach cadets at West Point.

Captain Pixler is a TAC (Tactical) officer at West Point, a mentor for a company of 120 cadets. “My main job is to educate, train, and inspire young Americans to be future officers in the United States Army.... I have the ability to interact with the cadets and influence their perceptions, and to give to them some of the knowledge I didn’t have [when I was a cadet] and teach them how to be successful. It is an opportunity to build a legacy. I always tell cadets to be the best that they can be. You can never change the past, yet the things you do today can inspire the choices you make tomorrow.”