



# CAPTAIN ZACHARIAH FIKE UNITED STATES ARMY GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR

Operation Iraqi Freedom  
Operation Enduring Freedom

It was an old, dusty antique store, located at the intersection between the Valley of Ashes and the Garden of Eden. Despite its outward appearance, this forlorn shop held a magnificent valuable. This treasure took the shape of a tarnished and forgotten, yet unadulterated medal, and would lead to the discovery of Captain Zachariah Fike's true passion and mission today.

Zachariah Fike was born March 30, 1981 in Wiesbaden, Germany. His parents were both soldiers in the United States Army. His father was a Vietnam War veteran, and the Garrison Sergeant Major at Fort Drum, New York. His mother was one of the first female drill sergeants in the Army.

Throughout his early childhood, Zachariah moved around often with his family. He enjoyed seeing the world in his early youth, traveling from base to base. He always attended a school on military grounds, making friends with other students who also had parents in the military. All this changed when he entered high school in Carthage, New York, a public school. Zachariah was one of few students there who was a military brat.

After spending most of his life around military members and living on military bases, young Zachariah did not want anything to do with the Armed Forces. Yet, he decided to join the Army for the benefits of college tuition. On June 6, 1998, exactly 54 years after Operation Overlord was launched during World War II, Zachariah enlisted in the United States Army.

Over the summer between his junior and senior years of high school, he completed his Basic Combat Training. He described his training as a "wake up call." His mother did not recognize him when she first saw him. He had lost a lot of weight, due to the strenuous activities and minimal time allotted for meals. The trainees were often times made to exercise immediately after eating, and Zachariah some-



times had difficulty holding in his food. The drill sergeants partnered Zachariah with another trainee, who was over-weight, and figured out a way that Zachariah could gain weight, and the other could lose weight.

Only after completing his senior year did he conclude his instruction with Advanced Individual Training. He loved the excitement of travelling within the military, and he eventually learned to love his newfound career. He received training in the infantry, engineering, military intelligence, and Special Forces. He chose military intelligence due to his lifelong dream of becoming an FBI Agent. He describes his training as "very intensive," being taught strategy, war-gaming, and other classified information. He served in the New York National Guard as an intelligence analyst in an infantry brigade. When he joined a Special Forces Unit, he was assigned to the West Virginia National Guard. His special forces training consisted of learning advanced driving skills, marksmanship, and martial arts.

He received college tuition through his service, and was accepted to Marshall University's ROTC program. Sergeant Fike was often used as a class instructor for the ROTC labs, in which rappelling and Ranger challenges were taught to the cadets.

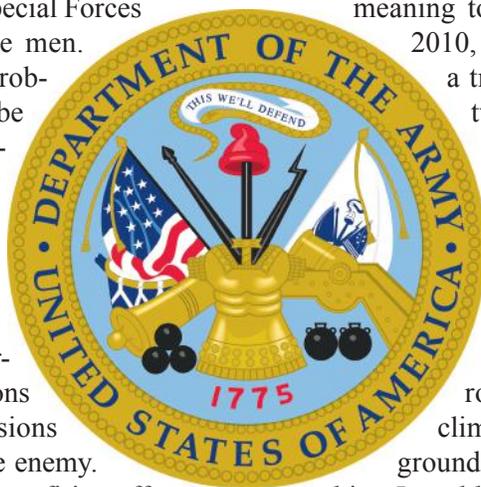
Upon his graduation from the university, Lieutenant Fike and his Special Forces Unit were assigned to deploy in 2005 to Iraq with a battalion from West Virginia and a battalion from 10th Special Forces

Group out of Fort Carson, Colorado. Within the two battalions, there were eighteen fully manned special Forces Teams. Each team consisted of twelve men. Each man had a specialty, so that any problems that arose while on a mission could be fixed without having to wait for help to arrive. Lieutenant Fike's official role was Service Detachment Commander. His team's mission in Iraq was to deliver supplies to the other Special Forces groups dispersed throughout the country, provide personal security details, and provide cordon security for special operations missions when needed. They ran daily missions throughout Iraq, sometimes engaging the enemy. The insurgents often fought guerilla tactics, firing off a few rounds before running away. Lieutenant Fike's first contact with the enemy came when a sniper sent a round whizzing past Fike's helmet. That was the first time that "I realized I was actually in somebody's crosshairs."

Despite the constant danger, Lieutenant Fike enjoyed the beautiful countryside. He explored the region known as the Garden of Eden, Mesopotamia, and Ancient Babylon. Many of the old buildings were very well-preserved or rebuilt, and they accurately depict the architecture of what life was like in the era before Christ. The people in Iraq were very open and welcoming to the soldiers.

"[They were] living in filth. Our presence gave them the opportunity to change that." They were very poor, and many lacked decent education. The culture and laws are very different in Iraq than they are here. The freedoms granted to citizens of the United States do not exist for the multitude in Iraq, Fike observed.

In 2009, Fike, now a Captain, was deployed to Afghanistan. The countryside, like Iraq, was very scenic, with pretty mountains and more primitive regions. The enemy in Afghanistan was more like an army, as opposed to the foe they had faced in Iraq. When the Taliban decided to attack, they planned the strike months in advance, and would often fight longer than the Iraqi insurgents before pulling back.



The Afghan Taliban enjoyed planning attacks on days that had meaning to American citizens. On September 11, 2010, Captain Fike and his team were refitting in a transient house when the enemy launched two rockets, each one four feet long. One of the rockets landed in the room where Captain Fike was asleep. "I was thrown out of bed onto the ground. I thought there was a fire. The room was full of smoke from the rocket propellant. I ran outside, where the first thing I saw was blood all over the ground.... The other rocket had cut through the flagpole, and I climbed over a fence to retrieve the flag on the ground. Everything was in a haze, and the only thing I could think about was picking up our nation's flag."

Fortunately, the blood on the ground was not human blood. The rocket had shot through several tree branches directly outside the house, branches that were covered with birds. The ensuing explosion left the ground littered with dead fowl.



Captain Fike did not know he was wounded until his Executive Officer pointed out his injuries. Fike was taken to the hospital, where doctors ran a series of tests to assess his wounds. Fike suffered lacerations to his back and leg, and a superficial burn to his leg from the rocket fuel. He also suffered a minor concussion, with Traumatic Brain Injury, along with a gradual but permanent loss of hearing.

Captain Fike spent the next three days on bed rest. His father and his mother were both distraught at hearing the news of their only child's injury. The Army was unable to tell Zachariah's parents any details concerning his wound. His family was forced to wait until Zachariah was allowed to call them from the hospital to reassure them of his health and safety. Captain Fike was awarded the Purple Heart a few days before he was sent back home.

It took Zachariah time to adjust to civilian life. To help him adjust, he developed a hobby collecting antiques. One day, his mother was shopping in an antique store, and discovered an old Purple Heart medal. The medal had been presented to the family of a veteran of World War II who had been killed

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medals in a special ceremony commemorating the service and sacrifice the veteran gave for his country. This often entails flying around the country at his own expense to “bring closure to people’s lives 60-65 years after the event.”

The publicity of Captain Fike’s organization has since spread. To date, they have returned over 100 lost medals. Every week on average they receive two or three lost Purple Heart medals, as well as more personal items like class rings or dog tags. Purple Hearts Reunited works tirelessly to return every item they receive to its rightful owner. Fike’s work has been shown on NBC Nightly News, and featured in the March 2015 edition of Reader’s Digest.

in action. When the family moved, the medal had gotten lost, eventually winding up in the antique shop. Zac’s mother purchased the medal, and brought it home to her son. This medal inspired Zachariah to research all he could about the recipient. He drove to the soldier’s old high school, and found a yearbook dating back to before World War II, containing a photo of the soldier. “There was now a face to go with the name.”

Captain Fike tracked down the soldier’s family, and, in a special ceremony, returned the lost medal. Over 60 family members attended the ceremony ranging in ages from three years old to 93 years old. Zachariah realized the value and meaning that his deed brought to members of the soldier’s family. This led him to create a not for profit organization, “Purple Hearts Reunited.” Its mission is to find lost or stolen Purple Heart medals, track down the families or veterans, and return the



In addition to returning Purple Heart medals to families, Captain Fike is currently the Vermont State President of the Sons of the American Revolution, and Sons of the War of 1812. He is married, and his wife is a scientist, also from Vermont, who tests medicinal drugs. The couple has a young son, Zachariah Junior, with another child on the way. “Families are very important. Life is short, so never say you can’t do something, never quit. You can do anything you put your mind to.”

