

Military Hero



Photo(s) by Courtesy photo
Capt. Richard Joseph Ducote

BAGRAM AIRFIELD, Afghanistan -- October 2004 was a monumental time in history for Afghanistan citizens as their country held its first democratic elections. U.S. forces including Capt. Richard Joseph Ducote and his troops were on station helping make sure the Third World country voted in their first president.

At the time of the elections, Ducote was the Task Force Bronco Charlie 2nd Bn., 5th Inf. company commander. He and his Soldiers were running 24-hour operations on and off their post ranging from daily patrols to humanitarian assistance missions in the Uruzgan Province.

Within the last several days leading into the elections, Ducote and his troops encountered a handful of horrific events including one improvised explosive device attack, two ambushes and a rocket attack.

“Looking back on that time now, it was obvious that even though the Afghanistan presidential elections turned out to be successful ... there were still many (insurgents) who never wanted these elections to happen,” Ducote said. “They certainly tried extremely hard to take out anyone who was aiding that process.”

One mission required Ducote and several of his Soldiers to escort two village elders in a convoy to search for an insurgent’s body in the area.

“The ambushes were quick. There was high-powered fire then all of a sudden there was an RPG attack and one of the RPGs struck my vehicle,” Ducote said. “The explosion knocked me out for about a minute, and when I came around I had shrap metal in my face.”

Ducote didn’t view the random pieces of metal lodged in his face as an obstacle, because he was still able to perform his duties. However, moments after he became fully aware of his surroundings Ducote realized he had a bigger problem because one of the village elders had been killed sometime during the attack.

“In hindsight we realized that the village elder who died wasn’t killed in the explosion, because he had a gunshot wound to the head,” Ducote said. “This was a tough event for me to get past due to the village elder being killed on my patrol. And because village elders hold a high standing in their villages ... after that incident it was hard for the village to want to help us again. But after a little time there was a bond of trust between the villagers and U.S. forces once again.”

During the election process, Ducote and his Charlie 2-5 Company Soldiers were escorting Afghan citizens who were transporting ballots to Kandahar to be counted.

“Once again the insurgents didn’t want these ballots to get back and be counted,” Ducote said. “On the way back we encountered a severe ambush. The ambush was very close range with a lot of gunmen surrounding us. One of the RPGs hit the front vehicle in our convoy, which ended up severely injuring a lieutenant riding in the vehicle. We were trying to treat the lieutenant, who was slipping in and out of consciousness and fire back.”

With one vehicle down, 10 Soldiers, one of which was injured, and no communications due to location piled into one vehicle in an attempt to make it to higher ground.

“We weren’t still being shot at, but we all knew that the insurgents were still following us into the higher ground,” Ducote said. “Once we were able to get down the road, communications came back up and we were able to request a medical evacuation for the lieutenant.”

As Ducote talks about his experiences, he often compares his memories to watching a movie.

“I thought about the situations weeks later once I was out of that environment and it seemed slightly surreal to me,” Ducote said. “From day one of basic training U.S. Soldiers are trained to play his or her role in the movie. And everyone gets their chance to do their part. And for me and the Soldiers in my company this was our part.”

Several months later in Bagram, Ducote stood in front of a roomful of his peers and was awarded the Bronze Star with V device and the Purple Heart for his efforts by Combined Joint Task Force 76 Commanding General Eric T. Olson.

“I was flattered to be awarded in that manner,” Ducote said. “It really did mean a lot to me to not only be recognized for simply doing my job, but to be awarded by Maj. Gen. Olson in front of my peers and friends was definitely one of the biggest highlights to my career.”

