HEAVY MEDAL

★★★★★★★★ 2010–2011 ★★★★★★★★

BY BEN THOMPSON

STAFF SERGEANT SALVATORE GIUNTA (above)
173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team

While returning from a dangerous mission deep in Afghanistan's deadly Korengal Valley in October 2007, Sergeant Giunta's exhausted squad was ambushed by a large number of insurgents attacking from a range of less than 20 feet. Ignoring the curtains of tracer fire zipping past his head from two different directions, Giunta took control of the situation, dragged two of his wounded allies to safety, and went on to single-handedly save his sergeant from being carried off by enemy soldiers. He ran the would-be captors down through the darkness, drove them off, and carried his comrade back to safety. Because of his bravery in that intense night battle, Giunta became the first surviving soldier since the Vietnam War to receive the Medal of Honor.

CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER JAMES WOOLLEY
82nd Combat Aviation Brigade

In November 2009, this daring CH-47 Chinook helicopter pilot was sent to evacuate a team of pinned-down soldiers who had taken severe casualties from enemy fire while fighting insurgents in western Afghanistan. Piloting a 30,000-pound aircraft straight into the heart of a raging war zone, with bullets and rockets zipping past him, Warrant Officer Woolley landed hard and began loading wounded soldiers onto his chopper. Even as the fire intensified, Woolley refused to turn back until everyone was onboard, and when an unexploded RPG round blew through the front windshield and embedded in the seat behind him, this determined warrior refused to turn his back on the wounded. He evacuated the five wounded men, went back to base, and then returned to the battlefield to extract the rest of the team. He was issued a Silver Star in 2010.

SERGEANT FIRST CLASS JONATHAN G. HILL
61st Cavalry Regiment

When Hill's small, undermanned base in rural Afghanistan came under a coordinated attack from more than 400 anti-Afghan fighters armed with mortars, sniper rifles, rockets, and other heavy weapons, in October 2009, this tough-as-nails noncommissioned officer took command of his platoon and led a desperate defense against impossible odds. Despite taking severe shrapnel wounds from RPG blasts, Hill personally led two major counterattacks on enemy positions, rallying his men to action. When the east side of the base was infiltrated and set on fire, he fought through the flames to recapture it—a feat that included shooting an enemy marksman. After retaking the east side of the base from the attackers, Sergeant Hill administered first aid to the wounded before leading an attack to recapture the helicopter landing zone so that friendly choppers could start bringing in reinforcements and medical aid. Hill and his men retook the base, but then, even though he was still wounded, the sergeant stayed behind and spent the next three days clearing out the enemy operations around the base and driving them from the sector. He received a Silver Star in 2010.

STAFF SERGEANT RODRIGO B. ARIASHERNANDEZ
United States Marine Corps

Staff Sergeant AriasHernandez's small detachment of marines was positioned in a remote Afghan village, tasked with the seemingly peaceful job of protecting the villagers from any attempts to block them from voting in the national election. In August 2009, in the middle of the night, more than 100 insurgents ambushed AriasHernandez's patrol base (which was little more than a small, mud-walled compound), attempting to take over the village and disrupt the election process. With enemy forces raining down mortar and RPG fire, AriasHernandez coordinated the defense against an enemy little more than 100 yards away. When he realized that the Afghan troops fighting alongside him lacked the night-vision equipment they needed to be effective, he loaded flare grenades into his M203, ran out into the open, and backlit the enemy positions by dropping flares behind the attackers. During the night and the next day, he and his men repelled six more coordinated attacks on the city. Thanks to their efforts, the election went off as planned, with a 95 percent voter turnout. He was issued a Bronze Star in 2010.

MAJOR NATHLON N. JACKSON
United States Army National Guard

In January 2010, this logistics and communications officer at the National Guard Readiness Center in Arlington, Virginia, was on her lunch break when she noticed a house fire in a private residence. When she learned that the elderly woman who lived in the apartment might still be inside, Jackson charged into the fiery blaze, made her way up the stairs, and found the resident unconscious in her bedroom. She hoisted the woman onto her shoulders, carried her downstairs through the smoke, and brought her outside to safety, where she administered first aid and stabilized the woman before the paramedics arrived. Jackson received the Soldier's Medal in August.

SPECIALIST RYAN CHESTER
25th Infantry Division

In July 2009, Specialist Chester's 19-man platoon was suddenly attacked in rural Afghanistan by more than 30 enemy insurgents in a coordinated ambush. When his vehicle was immobilized by explosives and RPG fire started to rain down on his position, Specialist Chester stayed in his exposed gunner's turret, laying down heavy fire with a .50-caliber machine gun. Even when he was completely cut off and out of line of sight with the rest of his team, he kept firing. When a stray explosive detonated his weapon's ammo canister, blowing Chester out of the truck and spraying his face and hands with shrapnel, Chester got to his feet, pulled out his rifle, and opened fire with his M4. When he ran out of ammo, his squad mates threw him a new rifle and he kept shooting. Chester fought off the enemy for 25 minutes straight, refusing to back down even though his truck took 13 RPG hits in the process. He's credited with nearly single-handedly saving his crew and the platoon from the attack. He received a Silver Star in 2010.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY (GIFFORDS) TOM WILLETT/GETTY IMAGES, (SOLES) COURTESY TEAM X-T.R.E.M.E

PHOTOGRAPHS BY (ABOVE LEFT) MANDEL NGAN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; (ABOVE RIGHT) CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES