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SALUTING AMERICAN VALOR

SELFLESS COURAGE AT THE MOMENT OF TRUTH



Nicole O'Hara

U.S. Air Force / Bronze Star With Valor

'It was either us or them, and it couldn't be us. It took me a long time to accept that.'

By Kris Antonelli
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Editor's Note: The following tells the story of two airmen – [Staff Sgt. Christopher Willson](#) and [Senior Airman Nicole O'Hara](#) – who were decorated for heroism in the same ambush.

Peering through a gap in the gun turret, Airman 1st Class Nicole O'Hara adjusted her night-vision goggles. She spotted the murky-green outlines of a gunman firing from behind a sparse tree line on the left side of the highway.

Heart and head pounding, the 21-year-old O'Hara returned fire, popping off dozens of rounds from her .50- caliber machine gun. The sky, pitch black just seconds earlier, was lit up by arcs of tracer fire.

"Keep your head down!" Staff Sgt. Christopher Willson screamed up at her while driving the Humvee and working the radio. "Stay low!"

O'Hara crouched as low as she could. Tracer rounds were coming from both sides of road. Willson, then only 22, slapped O'Hara's right leg.

"We have contact on the right," he yelled, his voice barely audible amid the crash of gunfire, the roaring engines and sharp radio commands to keep moving out of the kill zone.

O'Hara turned her gun to the right, snapping off more rounds in the direction of the tracer fire. A machine gunner in a Humvee farther ahead in the convoy already had unloaded all his rounds and was firing his M-4 carbine. Bullets bounced off the vehicles and O'Hara's armored turret as the convoy kept speeding down the highway.

But neither O'Hara nor Willson felt the speed. Instead, it felt as if everything and everyone were moving in slow motion.

Willson and O'Hara were in the third gun truck in the middle of a 29-vehicle supply convoy traveling on Route Tampa between Tikrit and Balad Air Base. Insurgents had turned supply routes in Iraq into shooting galleries where ambushes were common and improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, were hidden in everything from rotting road kill to piles of weeds.

On that day — Dec. 5, 2005 — O'Hara and Willson's unit had spent much of its time at Camp Speicher in Tikrit. The trip south back to Balad should have taken only a few hours. But when a suspicious object thought to be an IED turned up along the route, the convoy sat idle for about two hours while an explosives team determined it a fake.



Nicole O'Hara has left the Air Force and admits she struggles when recalling the most traumatic incident of her military career. "It was just so awful," she said. "In a situation like that, I had to go get help to realize that it was either us or them and it couldn't be us. It took me a long time to finally accept that." (Photo courtesy of Nicole O'Hara)



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Nicole O'Hara

U.S. Air Force / Bronze Star With Valor

Born July 28, 1984, at Moody Air Force Base in Georgia and raised in Burlington, N.C.

Inducted Jan. 12, 2004. Deployed to the Middle East In 2005, assigned as Airman First Class to 732nd Expeditionary Logistics Readiness Squadron, Detachment 2632, Balad Air Base, Iraq. Also served tour in Saudi Arabia. Later promoted to Senior Airman.

Both parents are Air Force veterans but did not serve in current wars.

WHAT SHE DID

As a gunner on one of three Humvees protecting a 29-vehicle convoy, O'Hara and another airman are credited with killing six Iraqi insurgents to defeat an ambush attempt.

WHERE IS SHE NOW

O'Hara did not re-enlist. She currently works as an adoption specialist in

Real or fake, it was an ominous discovery that set the tone for the rest of the trip. After traveling a short distance south, the convoy approached a highway underpass. On the other side was an Iraqi village. Balad Air Base was only about 20 minutes away.

"There was a bridge, and we had to pass under it," O'Hara said. "There was a small town there, and as soon as we came under the bridge, the lights went completely out. We knew from intel that was a bad sign."

The convoy had rumbled directly into an ambush.

"I think they were there waiting for us," Willson recalled.

O'Hara agreed.

"We think they staged the fake IED to delay us to give them time to set up," she said. "As soon as the lights went out in the town, the gunfire started."

Communicating constantly via radio with his colleagues in the other vehicles, Willson, the assistant convoy commander, knew that one of the trucks had caught fire and that at least one driver had been hit.

As suddenly as it started, the attack was over, and Willson directed all the vehicles to a rallying point about a mile and a half away from the kill zone. He called for medics to fly in from Balad to treat the injured.

Meanwhile, Iraqi fire fighters arrived to extinguish the fire. But there was a glitch — the Iraqis did not speak English, and no one in the convoy spoke Arabic well enough to communicate with them. Willson called back to Balad for a translator.

In the final tally, two civilian convoy personnel were injured and six insurgents were killed.

Although it has been almost four years since the incident, it still bothers Willson to talk about the chaos and uncertainty of that night.

"I don't like to talk about it, all the fears and what-ifs," he said. "Every time you go out, you expect something to happen to you. You don't know when it's going to happen, you just anticipate it and react to it the best you can with all the training that you have. You never get used to it."

O'Hara has left military life and has struggled emotionally with the events. She and the gunner in truck two, Airman 1st Class Christian Jackson, were credited with killing the insurgents.

"It was just so awful," she said. "In a situation like that, I had to go get help to realize that it was either us or them and it couldn't be us. It took me a long time to finally accept that."

Kris Antonelli is a freelance journalist living in Maryland. As a reporter for the Baltimore Sun from 1989 to 2000, her assignments included covering the U.S. Naval Academy.

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Austin, Texas, and plans to attend community college to begin coursework for a degree in nursing.

WHY SHE JOINED THE AIR FORCE

"I was out of high school for about two years. I was working at IHOP. My dad kept asking me, 'What are you doing with your life?' and I said, 'I don't know.' ... I had been around the military my whole life, so I thought, 'Why not join?'"

Iraq / Balad

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