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Cousins in Arms



Chris Houck (right) was part of the detail that picked up his cousin Jeremy Houck at Kabul International Airport. Pennsylvania National Guard Staff Sgts. Chris Houck, 37, and Jeremy Houck, 33, of Lebanon City, have grown close serving together in Afghanistan. Both staff sergeants provide force protection and security services for the Afghanistan Engineer District-North (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers photo)

KABUL – Selfless service. Duty. Honor. Respect.

Those Army values form the marrow from which Pennsylvania cousins share the brotherhood of combat.

Pennsylvania National Guard Staff Sgts. Chris Houck, 37, and Jeremy Houck, 33, of Lebanon City, have grown close serving together in Afghanistan.

Both staff sergeants provide force protection and security services for the Afghanistan Engineer District-North.

The cousins perform similar tasks – protecting the district’s workforce, responding to area emergencies, and serving as drivers and gunners. Chris serves at the district’s Qalaa House compound headquarters in Kabul; Jeremy at the district’s Shank Area Office south of Kabul.

That wasn’t always the case.



Afghanistan Engineer District-North Commander Col. Christopher Martin awards the Bronze Star Medal, the Afghanistan Campaign Medal and the NATO Medal to Christopher Houck Sept. 11, for his service as a member of the Force Protection team at Qalaa House, Kabul, Afghanistan. Houck, a native of Lebanon, Pa., was deployed for one year. Chris, and his cousin, Jeremy Houck, also from Lebanon, was deployed to the district, serving as a member of the Force Protection Security team for the Shank Area Office. (USACE photo by J.D. Hardesty)

With their families having problems during their youth, the Houcks saw little of each other from middle school through their early 20s. The cousins reunited one night over billiards and beer.

Jeremy explained that he went with a different cousin to shoot pool after work one night a decade ago in their hometown. That cousin said his buddy Chris might join them. After playing pool with Chris for an hour, Jeremy asked, “What’s Chris’ last name? He looks really familiar.”

They confirmed that their last names matched, then a quick discussion followed as to where each fit in the Houck family tree.

"Oh, your dad's name is Randy," Chris said.

"Yep," Jeremy retorted.

"Oh, cool. My dad and your dad are brothers. We are first cousins. Where've you been?" Chris responded.

Since that pool game, whether living in Pennsylvania or serving in Iraq or Afghanistan, they have been nearly inseparable. The more time they spent together in discourse, the more commonality bridged them to become best friends.

"Jeremy is the closest thing I have ever had to a brother," Chris said.

Chris is a former Marine who took a hardship discharge in 1994 to help his mother Rose care for his father Tracy, who was diagnosed with brain cancer. "The loss of my father sent me on a difficult road," Chris said.

His renewed relationship with Jeremy helped him move on.

"Jeremy had already served six years in the Pennsylvania National Guard and our discussions revived many feelings regarding service to my country and made me question if I still had something to offer the military," Chris said. "Jeremy provided valuable guidance and mentorship on my path to rejoining the military service I had missed for so long, so I enlisted in the Guard in May 2007."

After a 13-year break in service, newly enlisted Guardsman Chris Houck, 37, was training to deploy to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom in September of 2008.

"It was a difficult time for me when I returned home from Iraq," the older of the two said. "Not many people can understand unless they have been there, but I joined the Guard knowing full well I would be deploying to Iraq."

Jeremy finished a deployment with the U.S. Border Patrol in Yuma, Ariz., then headed overseas as the Pennsylvania National Guard sent two brigades from the 28th Division to Iraq. A Houck deployed with each brigade.

Jeremy joined the 2nd Combat Aviation Brigade, a heavy aviation unit with AH-64D Apaches, UH-60 Blackhawks and CH-47 Chinooks headquartered in Indiantown Gap, Pa. The unit deployed to Camp Adder, near Baghdad International Airport, to provide aviation support to Multi-National Division-South.

Chris conducted operations in the northern Baghdad from January to September 2009 with the 56th Stryker Brigade team based at Camp Taji, the only Stryker Brigade in the military reserve.

They were stationed on the other side of the world from their home in Pennsylvania, just 60 miles apart. They spoke once in a while, but were never able to arrange a meeting, Chris said.

When they returned from Iraq, their esprit de corps never stopped kneading their call to duty. Both staff sergeants still wanted to serve side by side to share the unique honor of military brotherhood, he said.

Jeremy said, "After being home from my Iraq deployment for about six months, I still felt obligated to deploy. There was still a war going on and I knew I could help more overseas than in my cushy job at the aviation schoolhouse working supply."

For both Houcks, service is something revered, something honored, something born in combat. "It is the actions we take in the face of adversity that ultimately defines who we are and what we are made of," Chris said.

He said family understanding is important. He said his wife was supportive, but he sensed hesitation in her voice when they discussed another tour.

"It is one thing to be called to duty. It's another to volunteer for duty in a combat zone," he said.

"Many may ask, 'Who would leave their family and their loved ones?'" said Chris, a father of five, as if he was pondering the question himself. "It's a calling, a calling to serve."

Like many Soldiers who wrestle with returning home while their brothers in arms are serving in harm's way, Chris was no exception. He said he repeatedly asked himself, "Why do I deserve to sit on my sofa while so many others continue to fight?"

Jeremy didn't struggle with a family quandary, since he is single and has no children. "Chris has enough for both of us," he said. "I am still waiting for that perfect girl that everyone keeps telling me about."

Yet Jeremy shares his cousin's sentiment about service.

"I still felt obligated to deploy," he said. "There was still a war going on and I knew I could help more overseas than at my cushy aviation supply job with the Eastern Army National Guard Aviation Training Site (located in Annville, Pa.)."

Sitting at the kitchen table one evening, they decided to deploy overseas again. Chris found a position as part of a team that operates military vehicles called Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles, or MRAPs for short. Jeremy followed Chris' lead and submitted his paperwork a week later for a similar position.

Chris was called to duty in Afghanistan in October 2010 for a one-year assignment. Jeremy was selected at the end of February.

"Even though I deployed first, I knew Jeremy would arrive soon," Chris said. "There would be no wavering or second thoughts between us."

Once in Afghanistan, Chris was moved from the MRAP team to the Qalaa House Force Protection team. One of his missions was to pick up his cousin at the Kabul International Airport.

"Having the opportunity to serve side by side with my cousin only enhances the experience and further solidifies our family bond," Chris said.

Serving side by side also has fueled a unique brand of military brotherhood.

Jeremy said, "We joke around to each other that the Army would never put us at the same location at the same time, because we would end the war too quickly." When asked who the best staff sergeant is, Chris replied, "Anyone with the last name Houck."

Chris headed home at the end of September. He was awarded a Bronze Star Medal for his force protection work. He's considering another tour in Afghanistan.

"I volunteered to deploy because it is a great honor to be part of the 1 percent who serves in America's armed forces. I serve and continue to volunteer in honor of all those who have served before me in our nation's conflicts and especially for those who have made the ultimate sacrifice," Chris said.



Jeremy Houck stands guard as civilian engineers inspect an Afghanistan National Police site in Pol-e Alam on May 22. Jeremy, and his cousin, Chris Houck, both of Lebanon, Pa., have deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom with the Pennsylvania National Guard.