

Honoring sacrifice

Auditorium, conference named after six special associates

By Maj. Gen. Keith Thurgood, Commander



If you walk into the auditorium at AAFES headquarters and five nearby conference rooms, remember Darren Braswell, Sarah Briggs, Bety Desil, Maria Marek, Rebecca Pember and Brian Sonntag.

To honor their great legacies, we have renamed the auditorium the Darren Braswell Memorial Auditorium and the Corporate University conference rooms after Sarah, Bety, Maria, Rebecca and Brian because they certainly put their lives on the line to fulfill our motto, “We go where you go.”

Despite being injured in the line of duty, five of them came back alive from their deployments to Iraq; unfortunately, one made the ultimate sacrifice in the pitch black of an Iraqi desert.

Etching their legacies

By renaming the auditorium and conference rooms, we etch their legacies into the walls as constant reminders of those who have gone before us and on whose shoulders we stand.

For their remarkable bravery and sacrifice, each of them won a prestigious Defense of Freedom Medal, created shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks as the civilian equivalent of the military’s Purple Heart.

Each medal consists of designs that exemplify principles of freedom, honor, high achievement, valor, sacrifice and liberty. All of these principles are embodied in Darren, Sarah, Bety, Maria, Rebecca and Brian.

Their stories are absolutely remarkable. They knew that dangers would confront them in Iraq, but volunteer deployees



In 2009, Betty Braswell (front, in gray), mother of the late AAFES associate Darren Braswell, and family join Maj. Gen. Keith Thurgood and other Defense of Freedom Medal winners and their families on stage of the Darren Braswell Memorial Auditorium.

are special people who willingly leave the safety their homes to provide comfort to the troops fighting to vanquish America’s enemies.

A costly decision

As Darren’s six-month deployment to Iraq was concluding, he extended his stay for another six months. That decision cost him his life.



On Jan. 7, 2006, the Blackhawk helicopter carrying Darren and 11 others crashed after being fired upon in heavy rain and sustained winds. Darren died instantly.

He was just 36. He left behind three children.

Upon announcing Darren’s

death to a shocked AAFES family, my predecessor, Maj. Gen. Paul Essex, wrote, “Darren accomplished a noble mission on behalf of Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines. Darren will live on through those who benefited from his selfless service.”

Unforgettable sacrifices

I wholeheartedly agree. His mother, Betty, believes the Darren Braswell Memorial Auditorium will mean her son—and his sacrifices—will never be forgotten.

“When people walk into this room, they will ask, ‘Who is Darren Braswell?’ and somebody will tell them who he is,” she said.

Meanwhile, Sarah’s bus was part of a convoy in 2004 when a massive explosion destroyed the vehicle. She suffered shrapnel

wounds to an eye, face, right arm, right leg and backside.

In 2007, Bety was running for the protective bunker at Rustamiyah PX to dodge incoming mortars, but one exploded, sending shrapnel deep into her right heel.

Rebecca was working as a logistics manager in 2004 when a mortar explosion rocked the area around Baghdad’s airport. After suffering wounds to her mouth, she needed more than a dozen dental procedures to patch things up. Two months later, mortars exploded again as she was loading ice into a cooler in the back of a Ford F-50 pickup, sending a rock the size of her fist smashing into her right temple.

Building upon history

In 2006, Maria was serving as a store associate in Iraq when a mortar exploded about 30 feet from her facility, sending shrapnel penetrating into her stomach.

Brian was injured in 2004 when a bomb blew up the vehicle in which he was riding from Iraq to Kuwait, injuring his knee, upper leg, neck, arms and eyes.

Darren, Sarah, Betty, Maria, Rebecca and Brian build upon our proud 114-year history of serving the troops. We honor them and their service by the service we give.

I trust their families find comfort, peace and joy in knowing their father, mother, sister, brother, son, daughter, wife or husband selflessly dedicated themselves to supporting our Fighting Heroes.

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