

Fremont native honored for bravery

She attends State of the Union with First Lady

By Martha Coleson Meyette

The day after representing the Air Force at the State of the Union Address in Washington, Tech.Sgt. Michelle Barefield and her co-workers had to prepare for an Operations Readiness Inspection.

In other words, the Iraq War veteran and Fremont native, who had just earned a Bronze Star for bravery in combat, had to spend the rest of the week proving to the brass that she and her unit were ready to go to war.

Barefield, an Explosive Ordnance Disposal Technician (EOD), was deployed to Iraq in mid-March of 2006, stationed at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Falcon, about 30 kilometers southwest of Baghdad on the rural outskirts of the city. Her mission: to lead a team of EOD techs in dismantling Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) and clearing the way for other military transportation.

The first week was to be spent as a “ride-along”, observing her counterpart, team leader TSgt. Walter Moss, as they went out on calls, acclimating her extensive training to real world circumstances. One minute she was an observer, the next second she was in command, as Sgt. Moss was felled by an IED. Another of her teammates was injured.



U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Michelle Barefield from Fremont provided this photo of her in front of a vehicle that her Explosive Ordnance Disposal team used in Iraq.

“I became the team leader,” Barefield said. “I had to clear the scene, and lead the search for the remains of Sgt. Moss, and provide first aid to the one who had been wounded.”

After a couple days on safety stand-down as the entire unit mourned the loss of their comrade, Barefield was back at war. As team leader, it was her responsibility to direct the dismantling of IEDs and provide safety in an area smack dab in the middle of the infamous “Triangle of Death.”

“FOB Falcon is not in the Green Zone,” Barefield said. “It’s a much smaller base than Camp Victory, in Baghdad. It’s in the Sunni Triangle.”

The area outside Baghdad, she explained, is divided into grids, with each FOB assuming responsibility for an area of about 50 kilometers in all directions from their camp. Vehicles traverse mostly dirt roads, some so narrow as to be almost impassable. Huge canals line the countryside; some man-made and cement lined, and some natural, with huge reeds growing beside them to offer

very effective camouflage to the enemy.

Two Air Force EOD teams and one Navy team were assigned to FOB Falcon. The team leader was responsible for securing the scene; interviewing the soldiers who had called in the threat; positioning the trucks which had responded; setting up protocol to be followed; and getting air clearance before detonating the device. Barefield’s two teammates were robot operators.

“They had a really big responsibility,” Barefield said. “They had to make sure that every threat had been investigated. They were really good. They would not bring the robot back until they were certain it was safe.”

As the one who had to be the first to approach the exploded bomb and the area surrounding it, Barefield was grateful for their diligence and expertise.

“I always had confidence in them,” she said. One of her teammates was from Charleston Air Force Base in South Carolina, the other from Hickam, in Hawaii.

Barefield was deployed to Iraq in response to an Army request for additional forces.

“They were overtaxed,” she said. “I was the only one from my flight to go.”

A total of 20 EOD techs went as part of a task force to support the Army.

Those circumstances presented another challenge: learning the strengths and weaknesses of soldiers with whom she had never worked. Her flight at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in Goldsboro, North Carolina consists of about a dozen personnel. She has worked with some of them, including her husband, Jeff, since being stationed there in 1991.

“It would have been easier to have been deployed with my flight,” she said. “As it was, we three strangers had to learn how best to function as a team. And we had to do that quick.”

In the states, Barefield’s mission is to support the F-15 E fighters in all their muni-

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tions configurations. What that means in layman's terms is that they spend their days on base training and in the classroom.

"We read reports that come back from Iraq, and set up realistic scenarios that simulate those circumstances," she said, "and we're always learning about different configurations of IEDs. Pressure plates may vary, command wires may vary. The enemy is continually trying to kill us in different ways."

She said that command wires were about 50 meters long, but now they are more like 500 meters, and longer. The terrorists also started adding dummy wires: a device may have three or four wires running from it. "You never knew which was the live wire," she said.

Insurgents also placed decoy and dummy devices, either to entice the team into range of another device or simply to study the team's response.

When Barefield's team left the base, their vehicle was sandwiched between two others with soldiers aboard whose only mission was to protect her team. Nonetheless, they were attacked three times, and this 40-year-old mother of two was forced to wield her M-16 rifle in combat.

In one instance, the Army vehicle in front of her vehicle was hit with an IED strike, and all four occupants were wounded. While rendering aid to the fallen soldiers, Barefield and her team came under enemy attack, and returned fire.

The two Air Force teams at FOB Falcon alternated 24-hour shifts, but were always on backup call in case soldiers from another traveling convoy reported something suspicious.

"Those soldiers," said Barefield, "had to sit on it 'til we got there; which is dangerous for them, because they become targets. Mortars start getting

closer and closer."

The unrelenting threats wore on Barefield.

"I was frightened every day. I mean literally scared. It did not get any better. It's not like I obsessed about it every time I went outside the wire, because I had a job to do. I just tried to do everything I could as safe as I could, and hope I was smarter than the terrorists."

It is even tougher for Army personnel, said Barefield.

"Their EOD units are there for a year. I don't know how they do it. They deserve a lot of recognition. Some people want to go back again and again. Not me. The whole time I was there, I just wanted to come home. I don't ever want to go back."

Back at base, Barefield found herself consumed with maintaining a mindset that would help her stay alive. E-mails from home were infrequent because the computer terminals on the small base were dedicated to classified traffic.

"We were kind of cut-off," she said. "We had satellite phones, and I could call home anytime I wanted, but I really didn't talk to anyone while I was there except for Jeff and the kids. I had my mind set on the mission. I really didn't feel like chatting."

To friends whose lives overtook their good intentions to write often, she offers the assurance that she really couldn't afford the distractions. "I was in survival mode," she confessed. She added that she is grateful for their prayers, and looks forward to resuming those relationships.

The former Michelle McConnell met and married Jeff Barefield in South Korea, her first deployment. Jeff Barefield is a fellow EOD tech from West Virginia. He is retired now from the Air Force, but he is still dismantling bombs. He works for a company that is clearing ordnance from a

former Navy training base in Puerto Rico.

"Same line of work, but he's paid a lot more money, and he doesn't have to deploy," Barefield said with a laugh.

She said that her husband has been deployed everywhere but Iraq, while she has had extended tours in Korea, Kosovo, Iraq and two in Qatar.

As a student in the Fremont public school system, the soft spoken and somewhat reserved Barefield played the violin in Eldon Durkee's school orchestra, but running is her passion now. With both the violin and the running shoes staring at her from her bedroom closet, "It's the shoes that call to me," she admitted. She ran her first marathon in Charlotte 10 years ago, and has completed four others and competed in two triathlons, placing in her age group in one of them.

"I love it," she said. "It gets addictive. If I can, I'll usually do a long run on weekends."

So does Jeff run with her? "First of all, he hates it," she laughed. "Second, Jeff and I have lived and worked together for 16 years. It's my relaxation time."

The first two hours of her workday on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays are mandatory physical training, with a two-mile run required.

"I usually go four or five," she said. The other days she runs on her lunch hour. "I get so little time with my kids that I don't like to take time away from them in the evenings."

Their daughters are 13-year-old Amanda and six-year-old Rachel. Amanda is an accomplished horsewoman; at the age of 11 she was an instructor for the handicapped riders' program. She switched from English to Western for the excitement of the rodeo. She and her horse, Injun Performer, regularly win the barrel racing



TSgt. Michelle Barefield recently received a visit from her sister Maggie DeKryger (right) of Fremont and Jaci Wiersema at Barefield's base in North Carolina.

and fastest horse events.

Rachel took up dance, and also competes in Pee Wee rodeos. She is an avid reader, an animal lover like the rest of her family, and is determined to be a veterinarian. Her favorite animals at the moment are frogs and bats. She is in the process of building a bat house with her father and spends her time in the evenings watching for bats and rescuing buckets of frogs from the pool in the back yard.

The support system at Seymour Johnson is extraordinary, said Barefield, when it comes to juggling the service and the children. In a pinch, her mom can come and stay in the house with the kids. Her mother and stepfather, Nechia and Ron Wright, live on Drummond Island. Michelle and her two sisters, Nechia and Maggie, grew up on Darling Street in Fremont and the family later lived in grandfather Ray Vickstrom's house on Stone Road.

Sister Nechia, the oldest, left Fremont a couple years after high school to visit their father Archie McConnell in California. She never came back except to visit. She now lives in Oregon with her husband and three daughters. Sister Maggie, the youngest of the three, works in Fremont and also has three children.

Her sisters are hoping that Michelle will leave the Air Force when she has completed 20 years of service.

"We are very proud of her," said Maggie DeKryger. "I know she loves her job, and she's very good at it. I just wish she'd get out, and be safe."

"I tell her not to re-up. Nope. Don't do it. No," Nechia said.

However, Barefield is the second highest ranking enlisted woman on active duty in her field, and the woman above her is scheduled to retire soon.

That, and her award-winning heroism on the battlefield, may have helped draw White House attention to her, but she said that the impetus for the invitation to join First Lady Laura Bush for the State of the Union Address was a nomination to be included in a proposed book, "Portrait of Courage." Barefield does not know yet if her story survived the nomination process for inclusion in the book.

"No, I wasn't wounded," Barefield replied to questions of the reported injury in battle. She did survive three IED attacks, provided aid to wounded soldiers, returned fire when fired upon, and coordinated the search for TSgt. Moss. She was awarded the Bronze Star in early January.

Then, the White House called.

"Mrs. Bush would like you to join her at the State of the Union Address," said a voice on the other end of the line.

"So, I'm like, 'Huh? Yah. Who is this?'" Barefield

laughed.

That Tuesday, Jeff, Michelle and Amanda traveled to Washington D.C. Their first stop was the White House, where they met with senior staff members and the other guests of the First Lady at a reception in their honor. Jeff and Amanda watched the address from the White House, while Michelle sat just behind Laura Bush and the Vice-President's wife, Lynn Cheney. TSgt. Barefield reported that she appreciated the warmth and friendliness exhibited by the two women.

Following the address, each of the honored guests met President George Bush and had their pictures taken with him and his wife, then returned to the White House to rejoin their families and companions. The next day, the Barefields met the two Michigan senators and Congressman Peter Hoekstra before visiting the Holocaust Museum.

It was quite an experience for an Air Force tech sergeant and her family, one of many unique experiences she has had.

She recalls that she and a team member swept the U.S. Embassy in Beijing and met the Vice-President a few years back when Cheney was there. Their flight has also provided security for many United Nations dignitaries, and they were assigned the task of sweeping the General Assembly for the UN's 50th Anniversary.