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# Wearing two hats: CA soldier is also a pro rodeo cowboy

Story by Staff Sgt. Ryan Matson

January 13, 2011

Laghman Province, Afghanistan — He said he wanted the national anthem to mean something more to him when he heard it at rodeos.

That's why U.S. Army Sgt. Toby Hall, a team leader with Company A, 413th Civil Affairs Battalion out of Lubbock, Texas, said he joined the Army.

"Before I joined, you'd hear the national anthem and hear the speaker talk about soldiers while I was trying to get all fired up to ride a horse or a bull. I'd think to myself, 'Man I'm nothing but a big sissy - they're over there fighting for my country and all I'm doing is getting on some horse that's going to buck for eight seconds,'" Hall said. "That was kind of a reason I joined; I wanted it to mean something more to me when I heard that song play. If it wasn't for us over here, I wouldn't be able to ride back home."

Presently, Hall is a civil affairs soldier deployed to Forward Operating Base Mehtar Lam as part of Task Force Ironman. Ironically, the task force is under the command of the 1st Battalion, 133rd Infantry Regiment, a part of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 34th Infantry Division, nicknamed the "Red Bulls."

Back in his hometown of Amarillo, Texas, however, Hall earns his living as a professional rodeo cowboy, competing in the bull riding and bareback bronco riding events. He competes in rodeo circuits throughout Texas and the Midwest, to include the Texas Cowboys Rodeo Association, the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, and the Kansas Pro Rodeo Association, for which he is the bareback riding director.

Possibly the only thing about Hall that doesn't scream cowboy is his height. He's about six feet tall, a good height for a movie cowboy, but not the ideal bull rider or bareback bronco rider's build.

"Most of those guys are between five feet, six and five feet, eight, 130, maybe 140 pounds," Hall said.

Everything else about Hall is the genuine article. He has a stockpile of 63 cans of Copenhagen in his room and always a dip



U.S. Army Sgt. Toby Hall, a team leader with Company A, 413th Civil Affairs Battalion out of Lubbock, Texas, rides the bucking bronco, Lana Banana, at the Texas Cowboy Rodeo Association membership drive rodeo in Shamrock, Texas, April 2009. Now, Hall, from Amarillo, Texas, is conducting missions in villages throughout eastern Afghanistan as an Army Reserve civil affairs soldier. In his civilian occupation when he is stateside, Hall is a professional rodeo cowboy, competing in the bareback bronco and bull riding events. (Photo courtesy of Lone S Photos)

in his mouth. He has a deep voice with a bit of a Texan twang and though he's very polite and friendly, always laughing, he walks with a bit of a swagger. His room is lined with cowboy magazines, Louis L'Amour books, John Wayne sayings, pictures of family and friends and their horses and ranches. He can talk for hours about country music.

Hall said he's rode in rodeos all his life and he's got the scars, bumps and bruises to prove it. About two inches above his right eye on his forehead is a slanted scar from where a bronco kicked him in the head. His left pinky is mangled into a u-shape and won't straighten anymore. He's broken his nose three times, his right wrist several times on bareback riggings, his finger, his ankle, had a disk in his back pushing against his sciatic nerve and fractured his right leg when a horse stepped on it on the ground. He said the back injury was the worst, and often he'd wake up at night crying.

"To be a cowboy," Hall said, "you gotta be tough."

## **A family tradition**

Hall, was born to be a cowboy, literally.

His father, Eddie, was a professional rodeo bull rider for several years, before turning in his spurs to run a construction business in Amarillo. Hall said he always wanted to be like his father and be a cowboy.

"Before I ever got on an animal, I remember being really little and taping a piece of notebook paper onto my back for a rodeo number," Hall said. "I'd be riding around on a little stick pony, except mine bucked! I always knew I wanted to be a cowboy. In a small town in Texas, it's what you did for fun."

He said he climbed aboard his first live animal, a sheep, when he was five years old and won the first rodeo he entered. From there, he progressed to calves, to steers, junior bulls, and finally to the 2,000-pound bulls he rides now. He said when he was a junior in high school, he found his niche, though, riding bareback broncos.

"The rodeo sponsor told me, 'Hey you can ride bulls, you should try bareback horses,'" Hall recalled. He said he immediately enjoyed it and qualified for the Texas high school finals in bareback riding his junior and senior years. Though he loved riding, he said in high school, football was more his focus.

Hall said that changed when he got a rodeo scholarship to Tarleton State, in the "cowboy capital of the world," Stephenville, Texas. He said he got offers from the top five rodeo schools in the country, but chose Tarleton State because of its proud tradition and reputation as a top rodeo school.

"I realized I'd rather just have fun and make something of my life by constantly riding on the rodeo circuits," he said.

From Tarleton State, Hall transferred to West Texas A & M, because the rodeo coach's younger brother was a friend of Hall's whom he had always rode with growing up in Amarillo. While still attending West Texas A & M, Hall said he turned professional, getting his rodeo card at the age of 21.

Hall said he rode thousands of horses in thousands of rodeos but there is one horse that sticks out to him. He said his nemesis is a horse named Outlaw, whom he has drawn many times in competitions.

"I hate that horse with a passion," Hall said. "I draw that same horse every time and me and him don't get along. He kicks me off every time I jump on him, no matter how well I'm riding that sucker. He's just really, really strong."

Hall said when he gets back from this deployment, he knows Outlaw will be back in Texas waiting for him, ready to try and buck him off once again.

You have to win to get paid

Hall said he loves the rodeo, because it is a sport like no other. First of all, he said, unlike football, baseball and other American sports, it is a sport that was based on work.

"Cowboys used to break horses and have contests to see who could stay on the longest," Hall said. "That's really how the whole thing started."

He also said he likes the rodeo, and that it is unique, because money is not guaranteed.

"That's the difference between rodeo and other pro sports," Hall said. "You don't get paid to lose. Anybody and their dog can buy a permit to enter rodeos once they turn 18. But you have to make so much money professionally before you can actually get your pro card."

But above the thrill of riding a 2,000-pound animal and the uniqueness of the sport, Hall said it is the fellowship with the other riders he enjoys the most.

"The main thing I like about the rodeo, though, are the friendships," Hall said. "The cowboys you ride with are your lifelong friends. The only way to travel is by car or by plane, so we'd pile in as many cowboys as we can into a car to make it cheaper to get to the rodeos. We go rodeo to rodeo to rodeo together."

He said cowboys will also help each other out, paying entry fees to the next rodeo for another cowboy when that cowboy had a rough ride and didn't win any money.

"I've done it for other people, and I've had it done for me," he said. "Not everybody can be first."

## **Better halves**

Hall said he has two partners in life, his riding partner, Mark Owens, with whom he's rode for six years, and his fiancée, another soldier, Staff Sgt. Jeanine Pollard.

Pollard, who is also a civil affairs team leader in Company A, 413th Civil Affairs Battalion, is one person Hall did not meet through the rodeo, although she grew up on a ranch in Cloud Croft, New Mexico.

Hall said he met Pollard through the Army.

"We realized we liked each other more than friends," he said. "And we've been best friends ever since"

Even though they are deployed to separate parts of Afghanistan, Hall said he talks to Pollard every night possible and their cross paths every now and again in country. He also said her family sends him a lot of care packages.

Pollard said one thing she likes about Hall being a cowboy is she knows he is following his dream.

"I think it's very cool that he's upholding the tradition of being a cowboy," Pollard said. "I like that he's a cowboy and he does what he loves, and I also like that he takes time out to serve his country as well."

Hall said he watched Owens, who is eight years older, ride as a kid when he was growing up in Amarillo and admired him as a rider. However the two did not meet until 2004 at a church rodeo. Hall said he was 19 then and cocky. He had a 12-point lead in the rodeo and was all but guaranteed a victory check. That's when Mark drew a horse named Happy Appy, which he described as "the rankest horse on the circuit."

"So we're at this rodeo and Mark draws Happy Appy, and I'm thinking 'OK, either Mark's going to come really close to tying me if he rides him, or he's gonna get bucked off,'" Hall recalled. "This horse bucks like no other. I've never seen that horse buck that hard, and he's just one of the best horses there is."

"He started bucking his normal trip and he couldn't get Mark off, so he just started doing this crazy stuff I've never even seen this horse do before. He could not get Mark off; Mark just kept spurring him hard. So, Mark got 89 points and beat me by a point! No one was anywhere close to us."

Ever since that day, Hall said he and Owens have been inseparable, as in every day, all day long. They worked at the same company as welders during the week, and went to the rodeo together on weekends. They worked out for the circuit together, lifting weights and running.

Owens said meeting Hall revitalized his career.

"I was ready to retire when I met Toby," Owens said. "But we kind of feed off each other; I've had the best years of my career since we became travelling partners."

Hall said he often spent holidays with Owens' family, which he considers like his own. He said he especially misses riding with his friend this year, since Owens made the Prairie Circuit finals.

"Mark said he still likes to rodeo, but since I'm gone, it's not fun like it was," Hall said. "He said it's more like a job to him now."

Owens said he misses his riding partner, also, but he is proud of the things he's doing as a deployed soldier.

"I think the commitment it takes to do what he's doing is awesome," Owens said. "Also, the selflessness is amazing; most rodeo cowboys don't have that level of selflessness."

He said the other riders support him whole-heartedly.

"Everywhere I go, I get stopped by somebody and asked how he's doing," Owens said. "The riders always talk about how great it is what he's doing over there."

Hall said he keeps in touch with Owens, and all his fellow cowboys, and follows them as they compete in rodeos back home. He said he loves his job in the Army, particularly serving his country, but can't wait to get back on the circuit when he gets back home.

"As soon as his boots hit the ground," Owens said. "I've got a bunch of PRCA events for us to go to!"

## Two dangerous jobs

In Afghanistan, Hall is not riding bulls. Instead, he is riding along with the Red Bulls' infantry soldiers, going out on missions to villages throughout their area of operations.

Hall, who joined the Army Reserve right after he graduated from college with a degree in agricultural engineering in January 2008, tries to assess the climate of the town by talking directly with its people.

"I try to find the village elder or malik and try to find out what they think of us," he said. "I also try to see what kind of problems the village has and if the enemy is there. I have my own way of doing that, that I've been trained to do, without coming straight out and saying 'Where's the Taliban?' I try to build a relationship with these people."

The relationship is key, Hall said, because the people need to know they can trust him and the coalition's soldiers. He said in the past, civil affairs teams built projects in villages just to say they've contributed to the towns. He said his team tries to find ways to help the villagers improve their town and make it more stable in the long-term.

"I try to ask them about their farms, livestock, wells, hydroelectric power, all sorts of things," he said. "Without us going in and talking to them, they're scared to death of us, and I would be to if somebody was rolling through my town in big old trucks with big old guns on them."

"We let them know we're not here to hurt them, we're here to protect them from the Taliban and give them work so they don't have to join the Taliban. I let them know we're not going to be here forever, and we're not giving out handouts, so we ask them, 'What can I do to help you out, so you can do this on your own?' I like that I actually get to interact with the people

here, and see first-hand how they lives in their homes.”

Travelling to the town involves stepping into any role needed in the convoy. Hall has served as truck commander or gunner on the missions before. Then he and his team dismount and engage the villagers. When the convoy or the dismounted Soldiers take fire, Hall puts aside his civil affairs role to engage the enemy.

“If somebody’s shooting at us, I’m not going to stay back and be scared, we’ll be right up with the infantry guys doing our thing,” Hall said.

As for the rodeo, Hall doesn’t see himself quitting riding anytime soon.

“It all depends on how tough you are and how long you wanna keep taking that beating,” he said. “I’m going to ride until my body won’t let me anymore.”



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