

# 'He was just a baby'

December 18, 2011

By Staff Sgt. Lindsey Kibler

1



JOINT-BASE LEWIS MCCORD, Wash. (Dec. 18, 2011) -- While reading recent news from Afghanistan, I was surprised to open the Alaska Post and see a familiar face -- Spc. James Burnett Jr.

I spent time with Burnett while covering his battalion's operations in Kandahar province. Oct. 17 was the first night I met him; we spent eight hours waiting in a Stryker for the men in his company to return from a foot patrol in Do'ab village. In the not-so-spacious confines of the vehicle, I heard about this young man's life. He was 20, but his goofy demeanor reminded me of my little brother-- he was just a baby in my eyes.

He was 21 when he died one month later, Nov. 16th, in the same province he spent nearly every day patrolling.

The news stung.

The men of 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment, along with the 3rd Bn., 21st Inf. Reg., both of the 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, were sent to clear the Taliban stronghold that remained in Kandahar province's Panjwa'i district. It was an important mission, in a place where no other coalition forces had established a constant presence.

During the week I spent covering his unit's mission, Burnett would often tell me, "Sergeant, it's the real thing out here."

He was right. It was a dangerous place, and the insurgents were not willing to give it up easily.

I could sense he was scared, but I didn't want to ask him. Infantrymen don't share those vulnerabilities with anyone but their own. Fear seems to be one of the many things that bond them together, especially in times of war where they face the possibility of dying each time they go on patrol.

Pfc. Alberio Porto was Burnett's closest friend in the company. I called them twins because, in addition to their slight resemblance, they seemed to be attached at the hip

Related Links
<a href="#">Army.mil: Human Interest News</a>
<a href="#">Army.mil: Season of Remembrance</a>
<a href="#">Joint Base Lewis-McChord</a>
<a href="#">Northwest Guardian Newspaper</a>

the entire time I was with their unit.

In the week or so we had spent together, I was able to see the closeness they shared. Burnett talked about getting out of the Army, returning home to Wichita, Kan., marrying his fiancé, becoming a police officer and how he and Porto would celebrate his 21st birthday far away from Afghanistan.

The bond of infantrymen is one that, really, only infantrymen will ever be able to understand. As an outsider -- and a female at that -- catching a glimpse of it was a rare opportunity for me; one I will never forget.

There is nothing you are able to keep private when living in the close quarters these men do. They eat together, shower together (when showers are available), patrol together and sleep together, when and where ever they are able to get some rest. When it came to jokes, nothing was off limits -- mothers, grandmothers, physical features and weaknesses were all ammunition used in the tongue-in-cheek battle of wits.

Despite the banter and light hearted jabs thrown at each other on a daily basis, they also understood one another. They fight for the same thing, bleed for the same thing and die for the same thing -- each other.

Retired Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, author of *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, found that the most fearful thing for combat Soldiers was not the idea of death or injury but, rather, of the thought of letting down the men to their left and right.

"(The) bonding is so intense that it is fear of failing these comrades that preoccupies most combatants," the former Army Ranger wrote.

In our first meeting in the Stryker that chilly October night, Burnett and I talked about his role in this war. He said at times he didn't understand it but he knew that, in the grander scheme of things, he was doing his part like other infantrymen had done before him.

At 20, this seemed to be a profound thing for someone to grasp but that's the reality of war. You face fear and death and grow up faster, in many ways, than your peers who haven't served. The men fighting next you to understand this reality too.

The life of the infantry was new to me. As an Army Public Affairs noncommissioned officer, I've spent the majority of my time in a Corps headquarters, seeing the strategic side of the war when I deploy. But this particular trip to southern Afghanistan was enlightening and memorable.

Porto was with Burnett, and Pvt. Matthew Colin, the day both were killed by an improvised explosive device. Porto was seriously injured.

"I had other friends when I got to the company, but when (Burnett and I) started talking, we just connected like brothers," Porto explained. "Once we deployed, and after I came back from leave, we were never apart. We did guard duty, details, missions, ate and hung out together. We always talked about our personal problems. We helped each other out. We had plans after deployment.

"I lost a brother."

In the five years I have served my country, I've understood the Army to be a big family - my extended family, so to speak. Not that I have thought of it differently, but my time with these men showed me just how tight of a family the Army can be.

In his last Facebook post, one day before he was killed, Burnett wrote, "miss and love everyone so very much!!!...tell my dogs I'll be home soon enough."

Sadly, Burnett -- the Soldier I saw as a baby, a young kid sent to southern Afghanistan, one of the most volatile regions in the world -- will not get the chance to see his dogs, marry his fiancé, become a police officer or celebrate being 21.

Perhaps I was wrong. Maybe the young man, who I saw as a baby during those few days in October, was in fact a man, mature beyond his years. This was a Soldier who understood the dangers of his profession. He was an American who volunteered a service to our country that so few have.

Spc. James Burnett, Jr., has taught me lessons that no other experience in my military career has come close to matching. He taught me to live life to the fullest, to love those closest to me and to face fear and adversity with the dignity and professionalism that is becoming of the most honorable Americans our nation has to offer.

**BOOKMARK & SHARE**

[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Delicious](#)

[MySpace](#)

[Yahoo Buzz](#)

[See All...](#)