

COLONEL THOMAS CATHEY

For Army Colonel Thomas Cathey, April 10, 2007, started out like a typical day. Stationed in Baghdad, he was chief of a Military Transition Team, a group of U.S. soldiers serving as military advisors to an Iraqi Army Division. Together they had been running cordon and search missions in Baghdad, setting up perimeters around small areas of the city and then searching within that area.

"We had been conducting these missions since January. This was in April," Cathey said. "I thought it was just going to be another typical day in that area."

But by 7 a.m. everything had changed. The Iraqi Army soldiers running that morning's mission had encountered enemy fire before the sun was up, Cathey said. And the situation escalated from there.

"We thought it was going to be a normal operation here," he said. "It was the first time that we'd had this volume of resistance for sure."

Before long an Iraqi Army squad had radioed for reinforcements, and had taken protective cover in an abandoned building.

"We are down to our last magazines. We are out of ammunition. We've got to have help now," they told Cathey again via radio.

"There was no time. They were out of ammo. There was no one else who could get them. So I made the decision to go get them," he said. The day's mission changed from a cordon and search mission to an extraction mission, he said.



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Cathey prepared a team of 14 soldiers in four vehicles. While the Iraqi Army soldiers weren't far, Cathey knew getting to them was going to be difficult. They would have to take narrow alleyways to cross city blocks held by the enemy.

"We did know that as soon as we left ...and started down this alley that we would be surrounded 360 degrees, and we would be significantly out-numbered. But we also knew that we couldn't sit and do nothing and take a chance on these soldiers being overrun by Al-Qaeda," Cathey said.

"I knew it was going to be tough. But we'd been in the country. We were seasoned guys. We had a lot of confidence in each other," Cathey said. "I don't think we ever thought we couldn't do what we needed to do to get those soldiers out."

The convoy set out, their vehicles moving cautiously forward down a narrow alleyway. At each intersection they crossed they encountered adversaries. A grenade exploded just feet from the left from tire of Cathey's vehicle, taking out the power steering. At a subsequent intersection, "as soon as our bumper touched the opening of the alleyway, it turned red with tracers," Cathey said, describing the dust trails some bullets leave behind to help the gunmen know where to aim. Seeing so many tracers was a signal to Cathey that there were even more bullets on their way.



HEROES

"I thought we couldn't stop the mission, we couldn't turn around. We knew that what behind us was worse," he said. "We kept pushing forward to find these Iraqi soldiers."

But as the convoy moved down the alleyway towards safety, Cathey saw another Iraqi soldier waving to him from inside another building. It was a second Iraqi Army squad that had also been forced to take cover.

There was no way to fit the other squad into their vehicles, Cathey said, so they used the vehicles to shield the building from attack while they radioed for help, and then waited for a second convoy to reach them.

But by that time the enemy had figured out their plan, Cathey said. The Iraqi Army Brigade deputy commander made one attempt to send vehicles to pick up the second squad, but they were forced back by the insurgents. Over the radio, Cathey convinced him to try again. But they were forced back again.

Cathey finally had to make a decision. He chose to move the first squad to safety, but promised the second squad that he would come back for them. With his vehicle compromised, he led his convoy all the way through the insurgent-held area and on to safety.

The Iraqi deputy brigade commander was so inspired by what they had done, that he made a third attempt to get the men out, Cathey said. That third attempt was successful.

"They all made it out safely, too," Cathey said.

"For me personally it was just a very humbling, sobering day," Cathey said. It was only later on when he'd had a chance to be by himself and clear his head that he realized that they "had been able to pull off a very dangerous mission with no injuries, no casualties at all," he said.

"Several of my guys were awarded Army Commendation medals for that day," he said.

The biggest thank you, however, was the next morning when Cathey met with Iraqi Army leadership in the Iraqi General's office.

"Iraqi Colonel Munam stood there with tears in his eyes hugging and thanking me for getting his guys out," Cathey said. "I didn't need any thank-yous, but to me that was the greatest thank you I ever got."

"It was just doing the right thing to do for those Iraqi soldiers," Cathey said. "If someone hadn't helped them, they couldn't have got out."

Cathey received a Bronze Star with Valor for his actions that day.