



Photo by Staff Sgt. Glenn Henthorn

Tech. Sgt. Benjamin Horton, 775 Civil Engineer Squadron Explosive Ordnance Disposal team leader, responds to an attack on a security checkpoint July 7, 2007, in Kirkuk, Iraq. Due to rocket and sniper fire, Sergeant Horton used a smoke screen to provide cover. He was quickly able to neutralize several rockets that had failed to detonate.



Courtesy photo

TOP PHOTO: This was the Highly Mobile Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle Sergeant Horton was traveling in on October 19, 2005, when an Improvised Explosive Device detonated under the vehicle. The explosion was so powerful it lifted the HMMWV off the ground with enough force to cause the vehicle to rotate 360 degrees in the air before it crashed back down right side up.

BOTTOM PHOTO: This crater was caused by the explosion that flipped the HMMWV Sergeant Horton was in. The IED was estimated to be about a 110lb device. Sergeant Horton suffered a fractured disk in his back and a ruptured ear drum from the explosion. However, Sergeant Horton and his team were still able to engage the enemy forcing them to retreat. He was back doing his job within nine days, and was injured again by a Rocket Power Grenade explosion less than a month later.



Courtesy photo

After being selected as one of 20 National Heroes for 2009, Sergeant Horton (second from left) visited the White House and met the President and the First Lady. As a last minute surprise, President Barack Obama decided to have the heroes join him on the balcony during his Independence Day speech.

Surviving the Odds

Story by Staff Sgt. Jason Burton

75 Air Base Wing Public Affairs

As the dust settled confusion began to set in.

Unable to see or hear, the 16-year Explosive Ordnance Disposal veteran tried to make sense of what just happened.

As the disorientation slowly began to wear off, the Technical Sergeant realized there had been an explosion. He could not feel his left arm and feared it was gone. Still unable to see or hear and knowing there could be more Improvised Explosive Devices in the area, he felt the smartest thing to do at that moment was to immediately kneel down.

While sitting on the ground, soaked in his own blood and waiting for his senses to return, Tech. Sgt. Benjamin Horton, 775th Civil Engineer Squadron EOD, began to worry about his search team. He feared they were the ones who had triggered the IED.

What he did not realize at the time was that it was not the search team 50 feet away who activated the device. Rather, it was a British officer standing next to and speaking with Sergeant Horton that stepped on the pressure plate.

Unbelievably, the IED was literally between the two men when it exploded.

While surviving a close range IED blast is an astounding feat, the truly amazing part is this was not the first explosion the Texas native has personally endured, but in fact his sixth.

Of the six times he has been injured by explosives, one was an IED that detonated next to a vehicle he was in. He has been harmed twice by Rocket-Powered Grenade attacks and has been struck by a 25lb piece of shrapnel from a large IED. He was also thrown several meters when a nearby bridge exploded. During the most recent close call he was almost standing on the IED when it exploded, yet he still survived.

"I don't know how I have been so lucky to survive the things I have," said Sergeant Horton. "All I told I am probably the luckiest man alive."

Sergeant Horton's recent close call happened Sept. 22, in Afghanistan. He was assigned to a British High Reaction Force and was the only American EOD team leader performing missions with British forces.

"This was the most hazardous and dangerous mission the British had," Sergeant Horton said.

Whenever something went wrong, Sergeant Horton and his team would hop on a helicopter and get dropped off as close to the situation as they could. They would have to ruck in the rest of the way, disarm any devices found, rescue the trapped personnel, then ruck back to a landing zone and get them out.

"And this was all normally during firefights," he said.

There was a bridge that was vital to moving supplies close to a base within Sergeant Horton's area of responsibility. Situated near the bridge were several compounds with high walls where it was suspected insurgents used the walls as cover to sneak around the area.

After an attack that resulted in the destruction of the bridge a security team was sent to keep post on one of the compound's roof. Unfortunately, the team encountered an IED placed on the roof. One person was killed and one member was seriously injured.

Sergeant Horton's team was then called in to perform a Post Blast Analysis.

This procedure involves collecting evidence and forensics that can be used to identify those who created the IED. Anything from fingerprints to hair follicles can be collected, even after a detonation.

Upon arriving at the scene, Sergeant Horton did not like the situation. The way the compound was laid out and many signs he saw led him to believe there were several IEDs still within the structure.

However, there were critical assets missing from the security team after the IED attack against them. Despite his concerns, he decided to move forward with the mission, to recover the missing assets, and gather any post blast evidence.

Within a short time, he located five IEDs. He went back to the entrance of the structure to show his sweep team where the IEDs were located and told them which direction they needed to go. They began to re-sweep the area Sergeant Horton cleared, and started moving forward.

It was at this time that the British officer and sweep team commander approached Sergeant Horton to discuss what was happening. Sergeant Horton put his hand on the shoulder of the officer and began pointing out the location of the different IEDs that had been discovered.

The British officer started repeating what Sergeant Horton said to ensure he was clear on the locations of the IEDs. Seconds later, with the slightest pivot of his foot, the officer activated the pressure plate of an IED that both Sergeant Horton and the second sweep team had not discovered.

The explosive was located in between and slightly in front of the two EOD specialists. When the pressure plate was activated, the blast was so powerful it sent the British officer flying forward and Sergeant Horton was hurled backward.

"All I can really remember is the enormous explosion and being hit in the face extremely hard," Sergeant Horton said.

He wasn't sure if he was knocked unconscious but remembered blindly stumbling around. His left arm had been hit with a large piece of shrapnel and was bleeding pretty bad. With no feeling in his arm he thought it was gone. He knew he couldn't leave the cleared area, and he couldn't see or hear, so he decided to sit down and wait.

The search team made their way back to the two wounded men and began performing combat life saver procedures on them.

Unknown to Sergeant Horton was that both his carotid artery and jugular were cut. When a search team member started providing medical attention, it knocked dirt lose from the sergeant's neck wounds, and they both began to bleed profusely.

"Blood was everywhere, and people were freaking out and screaming," Sergeant Horton said.

At this point the search team member placed Sergeant Horton's hand on the right side of his neck and told him to apply pressure while he applied pressure to the left side of the sergeant's neck to stop the bleeding.

"I asked the guy working on me to try to clear my eyes out. He poured water in my eyes and I was finally able to open them," Sergeant Horton said. "But I still couldn't see out of the left eye and I could barely see out of my right eye. They both hurt like hell. I could only open my eyes for about 20 seconds at a time."

In extreme pain, Sergeant Horton refused the morphine offered to him because he feared he might have to clear a path out of the compound and he didn't want his judgment impaired.

Around this time his two young team members near the bridge realized what had happened and prepared a rescue team. Their courageous efforts to quickly and safely clear a safe path to the injured prevented any additional casualties during the recovery efforts.

"The actions my team members took were highly courageous and took great resolve and ability to safely reach us as quickly as they did," he added.

While waiting for his team members to clear a path to rescue them, Sergeant Horton decided to conduct a PBA on his self.

He was able to collect part of the pressure plate and some wires from the blast and was actually able to collect enough evidence used to arrest the guy who made the IED three days later.

The injuries caused by the close call resulted in both the British Officer and Sergeant Horton needing multiple surgeries. This attack was just one of the many life or death experiences Sergeant Horton has been through as an EOD team leader.

So far during his Air Force career, he has deployed eight times, during which he personally led more than 660 missions, 27 air assault missions, 206 IED clearing missions and has spent almost 2,000 hours outside the wire. Under his leadership more than 275,000 unexploded ordnance items have been destroyed as well as over 11,000 miles of road cleared.

"Currently, one of the biggest things EOD does is respond and rescue," he said. "We respond to other people's absolute worst day of their lives, and we do it over and over again. The odds are constantly stacked up against us."

And Sergeant Horton has seen some bad days.

"For whatever reason I seem to always be the guy that responds to the worst situation where people are trapped and we have to get them out, which means rendering safe IEDs in very hostile situations usually with small arms and mortar fire."

To date, Sergeant Horton has had his lower back broken four times, the top of his spine fractured, his left knee has been destroyed twice, his right shoulder has been seriously injured as well as his left arm. He has several shrapnel wounds in his legs, neck and face. His jaw is damaged after being severely dislocated, he almost lost his sight, and now suffers with degraded vision and is also mostly deaf in his right ear. In addition, he also has some symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and brain trauma from the multiple explosions.

Surprisingly, while EOD comprises more than 80 percent of all Air Force amputees, and despite all of the close calls Sergeant Horton has had, he's fortunate to have all of his body parts.

Despite the injuries he has sustained, he still presses on.

"A lot of people would have just given up, but I don't have that in me...I'm too stubborn to stay down," he said. "I am not going to let the enemy take me out, they don't get to win."

He added it also boils down to the fact that he has an ability that very few people have.

"For whatever reason, even though I wind up in these horrible, horrible situations, I know what it takes to get people out," said Sergeant Horton.

And getting people out is what Sergeant Horton loves most.

"The thing I like about my job is the fact that I get to rescue

people," he said. "When our ground forces get trapped due to IED threats and things start going completely sideways, when they have wounded troops and are taking fire, they call us. We go and clear a route to them and hopefully get them out alive. To me that is the absolute best thing because without us, they likely wouldn't go home, except for in a box. And this way we can send them home to their family...I love that."

His refusal to give up is a strong trait and his character is well understood by those who have served with him.

Staff Sgt. Geovoyd Little, 48 Civil Engineer Squadron EOD, stationed at Lakenheath Air Base, England, was deployed with Sergeant Horton from August 2005 – February 2006. He witnessed firsthand the dedication displayed by Sergeant Horton.

"He will always make sure the job gets done even if he has to stay really late to do it," Sergeant Little said. "He always did what was right for his troops, even if the outcome wasn't right for his career. Instead of setting himself up for success by leaving everyone else behind, he made sure you kept up even if he had to drag you mentally or physically."

"He is what a Noncommissioned Officer should be," said Sergeant Little. "Even though I was a new Airman at the time, I completely trusted him with my life."

While Sergeant Horton doesn't do his job for medals, he has a fair share of them including: an Army Bronze Star with two devices, Purple Heart with one device, Air Force Commendation Medal with two devices, Army Commendation Medal with Valor, Air Force Achievement Medal with two devices, Navy Achievement Medal with one device and an Air Force Combat Action Medal. He was also awarded the Army Combat Action Badge and the 52nd Ordnance Corps Combat patch.

Sergeant Horton's many accomplishments don't end on the battlefield.

He has received many awards and decorations over the years and most recently was the 2009 Air Force Material Command NCO of the Year. This honor led him to receive an even more prestigious position among the 12 Outstanding Airmen of the Year for 2009.

In addition, Sergeants Horton was hand-selected by President Barack Obama and the Department of Defense as one of 20 DoD National Heroes for 2009.

"This was probably one of the greatest moments in my career. We got to visit the White House for July 4th and met the President," Sergeant Horton said. "Then at the last second the president told his staff that we would be going out on the balcony with him during his Independence Day speech. Never in my life would I ever imagine that happening."

One reason Sergeant Horton pushes himself so hard is because of his Airmen.

"I never would have been able to do the things I have done without the teamwork and dedication of my EOD brothers and sisters," he said. "The bravery that they show, and the amount of sacrifices they have made is the reason I try so hard, because I don't ever want to let them down. To me... they are my heroes."



Photo and Layout by Staff Sgt. Jason Burton

