

Combat shots earn medals

Four Navy photographers will receive the Bronze Star for valor under fire today.

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The situation worsened quickly on May 16.

Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Steven Walter Harbour, who graduated from the Video Production and Documentation course here in 2004, went with a unit of U.S. Marines into the volatile al-Anbar province of Iraq. His mission: film the work they were doing to rebuild the war-battered country.

The group, though, started taking heavy fire from insurgents. A sniper shot at them.

"A Marine got hit in the knee and was stranded in the street," the 32-year-old Harbour said. "The Marines that went to help him got hit."

By the time Harbour and his comrades got inside a nearby building, "we were literally pinned down. Every minute that passed was making the situation worse."

Harbour set down his video camera and picked up his weapon, but according to the citation accompanying the Bronze Star he's receiving today, not before "he displayed tremendous courage as he continued the mission to capture the most graphic imagery of combat action."

Harbour is one of four Navy combat photographers who, because of footage they gathered in Iraq, are receiving the Bronze Star Medal, the fourth-highest military medal awarded for bravery, during a ceremony at Naval Station Norfolk.

The sailors - Harbour, Petty Officer 1st Class Jackey Jo Bratt, Chief Petty Officer Thomas Elwood Jones Jr. and Petty Officer 1st Class David Hoffman - belong to the Naval Expeditionary Combat Command headquartered at Little Creek Naval Amphibious Base in Virginia Beach. Jones, graduated from the Basic Broadcast Course here in 1994.

While the specifics of their citations vary, each describes a sailor who, amid gunfire and exploding roadside bombs, recognized the importance of documenting warfare. They don't do it for public affairs - those military officials who act as liaisons between the Department of Defense and the media.

They do it for the soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines on the ground. They do it to give commanders footage to study how their troops performed and how they can beat the enemy. And they do it because they hope hitting the record button or snapping a still photograph will somehow help win the war.

"On one very sensitive mission," Harbour's citation continues, "Petty Officer Harbour documented a captured terrorist who gave a demonstration on how terrorists were

building deadlier roadside bombs. His footage was used by the Army to inform explosive ordnance disposal personnel about these bombs."

Bratt, who learned to be a combat photographer with just hands on training, is 28 and one of only three women in the command, survived her share of dangerous missions.

"I was with the military-in-transition training team. We were going out on a mission ... to gauge how a village was doing. About 15 minutes into the mission we started hearing gunfire. I kept documenting until it got to a point where the lieutenant colonel said, 'Camera down, weapon up.' "

She also took still photographs of more touching moments.

"Every time we'd go on a medical visit, (U.S.) doctors and nurses would look at the children," Bratt said. "I'd think, 'This is why we're here - to better this country and make Iraq a better place.'"

Hoffman, who graduated from VPD here in 2005 was on his first deployment as a combat photographer, captured more than 172 hours of video during 25 missions that turned hostile. He received his medal, in part, for his response to an attack in downtown Baghdad.

"We were ... doing a security convoy and there were four Humvees that were playing the security guys," the 33-year-old said. "We were escorting eight trucks. About an hour into the convoy, one of the trucks broke down and we were stuck for about four hours in the middle of Baghdad."

Hundreds of people were in the street, Hoffman said. Cars whizzed by and there were "very few weapons to pull security with."

The troops came under fire and one was killed by a sniper.

At those moments, Hoffman said, "You know when to document and when to use your weapon."