

# Master Sgt. Billy Powers: A legacy of duty and leadership

By Jennifer Wimmer

Retired Master Sgt. William "Billy" Walker Powers, a Hancock County native, served 24 years in the U.S. Army, advancing through every enlisted infantry leadership role from rifleman to first sergeant. He earned distinction as a Ranger instructor and served with elite units including the 25th Infantry Division, the 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions, and the Ranger Training Brigade.

His service earned him numerous honors recognizing his dedication and valor, including the Bronze Star Medal, two Meritorious Service Medals, eight Army Commendation Medals, nine Army Achievement Medals, six Army Good Conduct Medals, campaign medals for Iraq and Afghanistan, the Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, the Humanitarian Service Medal, the

Ranger Tab, Airborne Wings and Air Assault Badge, Pathfinder Torch, Expert Infantryman Badge, German Parachutist Wings, and the Military Mountaineering Ramshead Badge.

A graduate of Hancock County High School, Powers enlisted in the Army on May 28, 1990. Upon completing training, he was awarded the military occupational specialty 11B, infantryman. His professional education includes all levels of the Noncommissioned Officer Education System. He is a graduate of the U.S. Army Ranger School, Airborne School, Pathfinder School, Air Assault School, Special Forces Sniper Course, Military Mountaineering Courses (winter and summer), and the Special Forces Antiterrorism and Force Protection Course. He deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation New Dawn, and Operation

Enduring Freedom.

Powers reflected on his decision to enlist after graduating high school. "I went and talked to the Army recruiter in Owensboro," he said. "Mom was really upset; no mom needs to see their son go away in the military and face the dangers of it. Dad was probably mad because we lived on a tobacco farm, and at the time we were still growing quite a bit of tobacco. With me being gone, that was a detriment."

He began his Army service at Fort Benning, Georgia, completing one station unit training (OSUT), which includes basic and advanced individual training.

"I got to go to Hawaii with a group of guys I went to basic training with," he said. "Some of us went to the same unit. Basic training really doesn't prepare you for everything. It's like kindergarten going into eighth grade, because when you get there you're learning a this stuff they didn't teach you in basic—new equipment, job positions and so on."

He was stationed with the 25th Infantry Division in Hawaii for nearly three years. During that time, he took part in Northwind '91, a 28-day winter training course in Hokkaido, Japan, where he learned Arctic survival skills.

"From Hawaii, where it was around 80 degrees, we showed up in Japan in the middle of winter," he said. "Hokkaido is the northern island of Japan, and they were celebrating their 100th anniversary when I was there. We did a lot of winter training, such as skiing, snowshoeing, Arctic survival and sleeping in igloos. I've slept in snow holes and snow caves, which was awesome because I absolutely love the cold weather. We trained with the Japanese, then went back to Hawaii."

His military education was extensive. Ranger School, a 72-day course at the time, is known for its intense physical and mental demands and begins with two weeks of pretraining.

"I was a very good runner. I didn't run track at HCHS, but I probably should have," he said. "My first two-mile in basic training was 11.58, which is pretty ridiculous, but I was just keeping up with people. I was probably a natural runner and just didn't know it. They said, 'Hey, you're scoring in the upper 90 percent of the whole battalion, and probably of the division, so you should go to Ranger School.'"

Powers did not pass the pre-Ranger academic portion on his first attempt but immediately returned and completed the course as a distinguished honor graduate.

"I went to pre-Ranger in Hawaii, a two-week course that teaches you infantry skills at a more advanced level," he explained. "I was an E-3 (private first class) in the Army, and was going to Ranger School. They graduated on a Friday, and I was sitting on my duffel bag. I didn't get to graduate. I'd been in the Army for not even a year and was going to a school that takes most people two to five years to qualify for. My team leader asked if I wanted to go back. This was not easy. You don't sleep. I got less sleep in pre-Ranger than I did in Ranger School. I was already beat up, but I said, 'I'm still good to go,' and went right back to pre-Ranger training that Monday. I went to Ranger School after that, and went straight through. I graduated on Nov. 5, 1991. Normally, the Ranger path is to go to Airborne School first, but I went after Ranger School."

At the time, Ranger School consisted of four phases lasting around 19 days each: the Darby Phase at Fort Benning; the mountain phase in Dahlonega, Georgia, where Powers later became an instructor; the swamp phase at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, known for chest-high water, snakes and alligators; and the now-discontinued desert phase at Fort Bliss, Texas.

"They also did rotations to Dugway, Utah," he recalled. "These places are out in the middle of nowhere. McGregor Range at Fort Bliss is really close to White Sands Missile Range. You saw all kinds of weird aircraft back then. I saw the first stealth fighter, and nobody even knew they existed then. When you're in the field, you only get one MRE (meals ready to eat) a day for five days and walk anywhere from 5 to 10 kilometers a day. It might be 2 a.m. when everybody goes into a rest plan—one person stays up while two are down. Ranger School is a leadership school. It's just a school. It's like getting your master's degree in infantry. I didn't believe that I was better than anybody; I just knew more about the operations than they did, and that's the key."

After Hawaii, he was reassigned to Fort Campbell, where he joined the 101st Airborne Division's Pathfinder Company. The base was close enough to Hancock County that he could drive home to visit family as often as possible.

The Pathfinder unit traces its roots to soldiers who parachuted into Normandy during D-Day. In 1994, Powers took part in the 50th D-Day anniversary reenactment in France, jumping from C-130 aircraft into challenging wind conditions.

"We went to England, got ready, flew across the English Channel, and jumped into Amfreville drop zone in France, and the winds were kicking—it was bad," he said. "You're not supposed to jump with ground winds over 13 knots because it puts you way off course. The chutes aren't steerable; you just fall from about 1,200 feet. I think we jumped to 800 feet that day to make sure everyone got on the drop."

Powers emphasized that Army promotions require soldiers to serve in a variety of positions to become well-rounded. Seeking a new challenge, he joined the 1st Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment as a regular infantryman and spent time with the reconnaissance platoon.

"I went to the reconnaissance platoon because I knew that work—I loved it," he said. "I got back to where I really liked, seeking and peeking and playing hide-and-seek with guns. That's what it was, but you didn't want to get compromised because then you'd ruin the mission for everyone else. I did that for a little while, then I got out of the Army. There were two helicopters that collided and killed several people at Fort Campbell. A kid in my platoon was killed in a grenade accident on the range, and I had to escort his body back to Pennsylvania. I was so sick of it. I was going to be a deputy in Hancock County, but I didn't. I got out, came back here for four years, and worked at a local plant and other places. I helped my family with tobacco and stayed in the Army National Guard, in a drill sergeant unit."

He later joined the Indiana Army National Guard. "It was infantry, and that was great," Powers said. "We had two guys with Ranger Tabs in our platoon, which was odd, but we did. Delta Selection—No Shit Delta Force (1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta)—has a tryout every once in a while on post. These guys are animals. They're amazing: super smart, physically fit, better than collegiate athletes. I went down and did their physical fitness test and did great. We had a 500-question psychological evaluation, and I passed. I was in Michigan when I got a letter from Special Forces Operation Detachment-Delta saying they wanted me to come to selection. That was in-

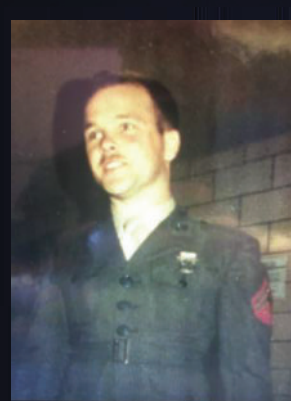


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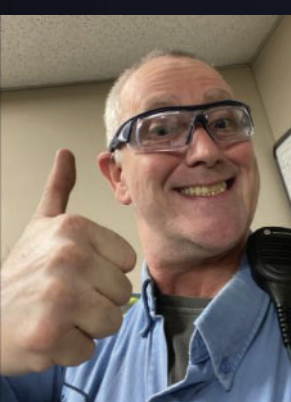
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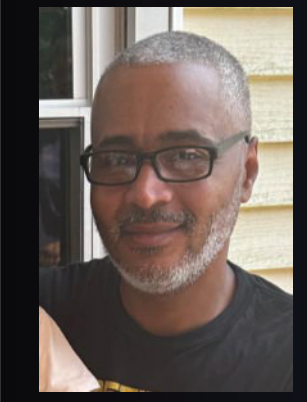
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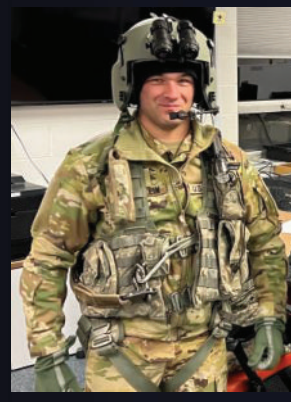
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