

Carson Spear

A Successful Military Transition

by David Fisher

Carson Spear is now in his second year as the Warhawk Air Museum’s Executive Director in Nampa, Idaho, and he couldn’t be happier. In June 2024, he shared his personal journey to a packed audience at the Warhawk’s monthly Kilroy Coffee Klatch, the largest gathering of veterans in Idaho. His inspiring story is one of commitment, tragedy, healing, and hope.

Spear grew up in a home just outside the main gate of Beale Air Force Base in Northern California. The home included their own family museum of military memorabilia his father had collected. Spear said, “Every day was an airshow, with SR71, U2, T38, and KC130 planes flying regularly from the base.” His town was filled with military personnel and his family museum was the place to be on Memorial Day and Veterans Day in Northern California. It was also the place where Spear developed a deep love for his country and for the soldiers who defended it.

Because Spear’s father spent nearly all their extra money on the military items that became part of their museum, Spear knew he would need to figure out how to pay for college himself. So he worked hard in high school and eventually earned an ROTC scholarship that led to his commissioning as an Army Field Artillery officer in August 2001. One month later the Twin Towers were hit and he was quickly propelled into advanced training. He spent one year



The Spear family at their ranch

at Fort Sill in the Officer’s Basic Course (OBC) and was one of the first groups to become familiar with the BFIST, the Bradley Fire Support Team vehicle, also known as the M7. Spear was committed to know that vehicle better than anyone else because his father had warned him many times not be “that new lieutenant” who thought he knew everything, and to always listen to your Platoon SGT. That challenge inspired Spear to do his very best in all his training.

He then completed three years at Fort Hood in the 2/82nd Field Artillery, 3 BCT Greywolf, 1st Cavalry Division, where he became a Fire Support Officer (FSO) first for D 3/8 Armor, then B 1/9 Infantry. After a successful Joint Readiness Training Center Rotation at Fort Polk, Spear was awarded his dream job as a Combat Observation Lasing Team (COLT) Platoon Leader, which is a Field Artillery version of a Scout Platoon Leader. COLT was attached to Fox Troop

as part of the 3rd Brigade Recon Team. While at Fort Hood, Spear’s team deployed to Missoula, Montana, to help fight the 2003 Fish Creek Fire under a national emergency assignment. His team was deployed to the fire line where they worked tirelessly to contain the fire, eventually saving the town. Looking back on that experience, Spear

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Firefighting in Missoula, MT

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recognizes that this deployment's huge team building value, along with their combined effort, shaped and strengthened their team for what was to come. Not long after the Montana mission, COLT successfully completed a JRTC Rotation and their platoon spent much of their days training at Fort Hood with the BRT with simunitions at the MOUT (Military Operations in Urban Terrain) site, completing combatives and ruck marches for PT, and weekly M4 reflexive fire drills and qualifications.

Early in 2004, Spear received orders to deploy to Iraq. He deployed first on a recon mission with 5BCT Command Staff and spent two weeks in sector right seat riding with 2/504th PIR, 82nd Airborne. When 5th BCT, First Cavalry Division deployed several months later, his convoy of vehicles and troops left Kuwait for Baghdad in March. Since Spear had completed the recon a few months earlier, he was in the lead vehicle of 5th BCT as a 23-year-old LT, responsible for guiding the entire brigade convoy to its destination over three long, hot days. He got the convoy there and the team started running daily missions to eliminate or detain enemy targets. Each day's mission was given to Spear with minimal information, so he developed the habit of writing up his own plan that covered specific timing, logistics, vehicle movements, and more. Since the COLT Platoon had much more specialized training as part of the BRT, the Platoon was commonly the main effort on numerous capture/kill missions throughout the deployment.

Spear's team traveled on missions by land, sea and air, but Spear was always wary of flying by helicopter because those aircraft were easier targets for the enemy. When they drove in vehicles, they often noted individuals along the way relaying their location to others further along their route. The enemy frequently changed tactics to keep our soldiers guessing. One unique practice was to cut out the floorboards of a van and then pull over and pretend to be changing a tire while someone dug a hole from inside the car into which an IED was buried.

One of the first incidents Spear was involved in came on his first night in Iraq. While driving on patrol, Spear noticed an open field to the south of their patrol that looked problematic. Just as that thought came to his mind, an RPG

round launched from the field, glancing off the hood of their vehicle and hitting a structure on the other side of the road. A second round flew by just behind his vehicle and small arms fire erupted from the field. The vehicles returned fire while hitting the gas to get out of the kill box. As the vehicle in front of Spear drove over a goat trail full of loose dirt, it threw up a cloud of dust that made it impossible for Spear's vehicle to see anything as they accelerated away. As Spear's vehicle followed into the dust cloud, they smashed directly into a parked car while going 50 mph, flipping the vehicle onto its side, and pushing it into a large hole that had been excavated by the enemy.

Spear radioed in enemy contact, their location, and the lead vehicle returned as each vehicle encircled the large hole, using it as their defensive position. A 40-minute gun battle ensued with Spear's troops creating 360-degree interlocking fire coverage with the help of their daylight lasers mounted on their M4s and M249s. Things became even more tense when they heard window glass breaking from second story buildings surrounding the hole and the enemy began throwing grenades toward them. One of his team members, Sgt. Brister, jumped out of the hole to take out a vehicle that was speeding toward them. Because the whole team worked together so well that night with great communication and following their training, everyone made it back to the FOB.

That first night was followed by multiple IED attacks. One of the most catastrophic incidents occurred while Spear's team was establishing traffic control checkpoints. After three days outside the wire in high heat and full battle gear, they were ready to return to base. Their three vehicles left at nightfall with no headlights in blackout drive, driving as fast as they could with the aid of night vision goggles down a dark winding road along the Tigris River on a route that had reportedly been cleared of IEDs. But Spear's non-up-armored vehicle took a direct hit on the driver's



First of four IEDs



1st Squad ready for patrol

side from an IED made from a 120mm mortar round that tore through the vehicle, sending it rolling into a deep canal amidst a deafening blast of smoke, sparks, and shrapnel. The vehicle came to rest upside down in the canal and quickly began filling with water.

Although the threat of drowning was very real, Spear was able to keep his driver's head just above the water line while Spear held his hand and tried to assess the condition of his driver's legs. Spear's translator had a severe head injury, his gunner suffered shrapnel wounds in his leg, and Spear had shrapnel in his face and neck, but they were all alive. Eventually, they were assisted out of the vehicle, but as his driver was pulled out, Spear saw the driver's legs were barely attached by his tattered fatigues. The other HMMWVs got out of the kill box after the IED went off, and it took Spear's team over an hour to find them because they were so deeply buried in the canal. It was very dark, they had been driving with no headlights, and their comms were destroyed in the blast. Everyone in the HMMWV was so badly wounded they all were evacuated via Blackhawk from the crash site, except Spear, who chose to stay in sector. The Quick Reaction Force had mobilized from FOB Falcon, and together with the remaining COLT Platoon troopers they searched houses door to door late into the night trying to locate the insurgent who had detonated the IED. Spear, his driver (who now has a prosthetic leg), and gunner received Purple Hearts stemming from wounds sustained during that attack.

Throughout the remainder of his deployment to Iraq, Spear continued to hunt bad guys by night while helping

local communities rebuild during the day. Several times Spear was given \$50k in cash and was told to go out and find projects with the goal of winning the hearts and minds of the local people. His team's efforts led to the rebuilding of two schools using local contractors and tradesmen. They helped re-route fresh drinking water, established a reliable schedule for electricity, and often paid locals with tractors and dozers to clear trash from roadsides to mitigate IED threats.

Although he loved the Army and had high hopes for a career in the military, Spear had seen enough action in Iraq, felt he had checked that box, and served his country during a very busy deployment. He made the difficult decision to leave the military and returned home along with his entire team. Spear credits that good fortune to his friend and mentor Platoon Sergeant Don Brister's leadership, the platoon's rigorous pre-deployment training, strong camaraderie, and their vigilance in the face of battle. When he arrived home, Spear found a job and soon began working the rodeo circuit as a team roper spending lots of time making great memories with his dad, brother, and grandpa.

After five years of rodeoing, living life, and trying to put the war behind him, Spear became heavily affected by many of his fellow soldiers struggling to reintegrate back into society after combat. It impacted him enough that he decided to make a change in his life, and along with Erin (his rock, best friend, and wife), they each made the decision to attend law school to better assist veterans with deployment-related issues. They both worked a hectic 60 to 70 hours a week job by day and attended law school at night.



SFC Don Brister and Carson

The years after Iraq were difficult. After being in a constant state of hyper vigilance, losing friends, and going through multiple IED and mortar attacks, Spear acknowledged that changes you. To help in his own recovery, Spear stayed incredibly busy, compartmentalized, poured himself into work and launched into completing his MBA directly after law school, all in an effort to better assist combat veterans with deployment related issues.

Spear acknowledged, “I am still a work in progress but strongly believe if the veteran will take that first step, there are many effective resources available, especially in Idaho.” Spear took that step and started attending Mission43 events, and continues to highly recommend their programming to all veterans and their spouses. It was through the friends and mentors Spear met at Mission43 that led him to his current job as Executive Director of the Warhawk Air


Museum in Nampa.


According to Spear, “I highly encourage any veteran reading this article who is struggling to just reach out and take that first step, whether it be the community, purpose, and comradery to be gained at the Kilroy Coffee Klatch at the Warhawk, attending Mission43 and Idaho Outdoor Fieldhouse events, or seeking support from the many other excellent veteran service organizations in Idaho such as the Boise VA Campus, IDVS, or IVN. There are many great people in our community working hard to help veterans, and it is ok to ask for that support. We’re incredibly lucky to live in the patriotic state of Idaho, which is so supportive of its veterans.”

Carson Spear is an Idaho hero. He represents the very best of those who have served our country. Today he continues to be an outstanding ambassador for the Warhawk Air Museum, as one who knows the cost of battle and represents our soldiers with honor and grace.



Spear family at the Warhawk Air Museum





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