

A DISPATCH FROM MICHAEL YON



Photos courtesy of C-52 Inf., 3rd Bde., 2nd Inf. Div.

Staff Sgt. Daniel Walwark, despite painfully bruised ribs, climbs atop General Lee to hook up a chain and pull the Stryker back on its wheels.

GENERAL LEE'S LAST RIDE

After having seen battles all over Iraq and saving its Soldiers' lives many times, a Stryker vehicle nicknamed the 'General Lee' brings its crew home one last time

By Michael Yon
For the Northwest Guardian

Back in 2005, when I hardly knew the name "Stryker," ... (One NCO) told me that his Soldiers so disliked the idea of the Stryker (at first), that when they finally got Strykers at Fort Lewis, the Soldiers tried their best to break the machines in training. (The NCO also) told me that all his Soldiers were converts even before they finished training.

Those Soldiers learned that the human body is not tough enough to break a Stryker without destroying the people inside, too. The Stryker is just too tough, too well-designed and too well-built. Before long, many Soldiers began naming their Strykers, though I've never heard of anyone naming a Humvee. Even an up-armored Humvee is just a machine, a necessary carapace. But a Stryker gets treated like a member of the platoon. Soldiers take extra care of them.

When a Humvee is badly damaged, it gets turned in to the mechanics with nary a further thought. But when a Stryker gets badly damaged, the Soldiers visit it and hang around it and volunteer to help the mechanics and technicians nurse it back to life. I couldn't make up anything this bizarre....

Route Tampa

Lt. Brad Krauss was the platoon leader of 2nd Platoon, C Company, 52nd Infantry Regiment, of 3rd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division, in January when they were patrolling Route Tampa and a route clearance patrol happened to be going by. The platoon sergeant was Sgt. 1st Class Wade Breaud.

Stryker crews often refer to their vehicle as their "truck," and Krauss' crew had named their "truck" the "General Lee." It seemed fitting.

Krauss and Breaud saw the route clearance team pass by going the opposite direction on Tampa, and to be good neighbors, decided to shadow the team in case it got hit. Attacks on this section of Tampa were frequent; hence the clearing team and the Strykers. The three Strykers of 2nd Platoon cruised about half a mile behind the clearance team, and so the section of Tampa where the three Strykers were driving had been "cleared" within the last five minutes or so.

Unknown to the Soldiers the enemy was holding a video camera aimed at the Stryker. Enemy videotape was recording. ... Krauss and his crew were about to drive over a culvert the enemy had packed with explosives.

The crew consisted of four men. Specialist William Pfeiffer was alone up front and driving. Behind Pfeiffer was the crawl space, called the "hell hole," that led to the crew compartment. Standing in the front

left hatch was Krauss. To Krauss' right stood Staff Sgt. Daniel Walwark, who operated the missiles and a machine gun. In the large single hatch to the rear of the Stryker stood Pfc. Devon Hoch....

Flying like Superman

As the bomb detonated beneath it, the General Lee arced like a dolphin from the sea of Hell. In the videotape the enemy posted on the Internet Krauss could be seen flying out like Superman, if you looked closely and imagined real hard. Hoch could clearly be seen standing in the back hatch.

And that was it. Our guys' lives seemed to be reduced to propaganda. The terrorists published reports that the Soldiers were killed.

But that's not exactly how it turned out....

Up front in the driver's seat, Pfeiffer did not hear the blast, but a flash caught his eye out of the right periscope. Then he saw sky through the periscope—it seemed like seconds, but the video shows less than that—as the Stryker was slammed onto its left side on Tampa. Pfeiffer was dazed. Some Soldiers say of this experience, "My television blinked." Or in more serious cases, "My television went black." Pfeiffer's television blinked off and back on. His eyes blinked open. He was still alive.

The detonation causes fine particles in the vehicles to dust-out the vehicle. The Stryker was filled with dust, but as it slowly cleared, Pfeiffer looked back through the hellhole and didn't see Krauss, who had flown like Superman out of the Stryker.

Hoch had been standing in the rear hatch and heard nothing. He felt a crushing pressure and his television blinked out. When his screen blinked back on, Hoch found himself atop of the missile rack inside the Stryker. Most men can't even crawl into that spot. You have to be part snake to fit into there. Hoch knew he was still alive, but couldn't figure out how he got stuffed into the missile rack.

Staff Sgt. Daniel Walwark was in the front right hatch, and he was hanging like wet laundry over his hatch. His legs dangled inside....

Walwark stepped out, seeing that Krauss was not crushed, grabbed Krauss' M-4 rifle, and that's when he recalls Krauss, who was rolling on the ground, and half out-of-it started yelling, "I'm invincible! I'm invincible!"

... Walwark looked up at Pfeiffer's driver's hatch, expecting the worst. Pfeiffer reached up and cranked the lever counterclockwise and the frame had not even jammed the hatch. It popped right open, and Pfeiffer ripped off his headset and began to crawl out....

With Krauss rolling on the ground—being invincible and not quite lucid—apparently, in addition to being blown

through the air, he'd landed on his head — Walwark was in charge, and he kept scanning for attack. He went back to find Hoch, who by now had wriggled himself out of the missile rack....

Krauss was coming back into the moment. He stood up on a leg in searing pain: He'd torn his hamstring muscle.

Meanwhile, Breaud was on the radio. No medevac was inbound. ... No backup was coming for a minimum of one hour, and possibly two.

By now all of them were on their feet ... But what to do with the General Lee? It would be up to two hours before recovery assets could arrive.

Self-recovery

...Breaud and Krauss discussed options, and decided to self-recover, but they had to turn the General Lee back on its wheels, which amazingly were not flat. Walwark said he could hook a chain to the tire and they could pull General Lee over with another Stryker. Breaud and Krauss thought it was a smart idea, and got out along with Walwark and Staff Sgt. Carl Felton to hook it up....

Walwark's ribs were severely bruised and excruciating, but he crawled up on the General Lee and hooked up. A couple mortar rounds came in but missed by about 300 meters.

Walwark, Felton and Breaud got the General Lee hooked to the tow bar, and then two Bradleys arrived. 3rd Platoon from C-52 showed up with Strykers, along with a wrecker, which broke down on the way and had to be towed by a 3rd Platoon

Stryker....

So they were towing both the General Lee and the tow-truck back to Camp Taji. Kraus and Walwark each stayed up in the hatches despite what had just happened, and so of course they were heading straight for another bomb, because that's the way it is here.

The second bomb exploded, making a direct hit. Walwark was peppered in the face with gravel, a tire was shredded, along with damage to the slat armor and ceramic. Staff Sgt. Brad Lobmiller was the .50 gunner. He was standing up, and was only a few meters from the explosion and was knocked back into the hatch. Pfeiffer and Breaud pulled Lobmiller into the back and suddenly Pfeiffer was the gunner. Through mixing everyone around, the crew from the old Stryker became the crew for the new Stryker, and Pfeiffer had gone from being the driver of the General Lee to the gunner in another, again proving correct the experienced platoon sergeants' strict rules for making everyone learn everything about the machine.

By now, five out of the 12 members of 2nd Platoon were wounded ... four wounded were able to (return to duty) immediately, but Krauss' hamstring was hamstrung and truly messed up, so it took him three weeks....

Stryker hospital

The General Lee was taken to the Stryker hospital, where the mechanics said it would take 30 days to get it back into combat. Walwark, Pfeiffer and Hoch were given recovery time, but used their

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recovery time to check on the General Lee. They were upset to learn that the truck was sidelined for a month, and so they persuaded the mechanics to concentrate on the General Lee, but they didn't have replacement armor.

Another Stryker was torn up badly and had parts, but it was a different variant and the armor didn't fit right.

The mechanics, along with Walwark, Pfeiffer and Hoch, made the armor fit, and General Lee was back in combat after only three days, and soon the whole crew was back in action.

Final ride

Many firefights and IEDs later, on April 15, the General Lee, carrying (Krauss) and his crew, were back out there doing their thing. This time they were just south of the Shiek Hamed village (when it was struck by a deeply buried IED) ... Suffice it to say that the General Lee took another one for the team, and again saved the crew.

Specialist Joshua Rose severely bruised his right arm, but (returned to duty) about 10 days later. But the General Lee was hit bad this time... This time, fuel was leaking out, the tires were flat and the frame was grating on the road. But somehow the Stryker kept driving and nearly made it back to base before the last of the fuel had poured out onto the road (without catching fire).

That was the end of the road for the General Lee. After having seen battles all over the Iraq, and after saving the crew's lives many times, the General Lee brought the crew home one last time.



Lt. Brad Krauss prepares for the ride back to base after the General Lee, in front, was righted.