On April 25, 2007, then-PFC Monica L. Brown, a medic from the 782nd Brigade Support Battalion, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, was conducting a routine security patrol with her unit in the Jani Khail district of Paktika Province in Afghanistan when one of the vehicles in the convoy hit an improvised explosive device (IED). Immediately after the explosion, the patrol fell under machine-gun and rifle fire—they were under attack.

PFC Brown and her platoon sergeant, SSgt. José Santos, left their vehicle and ran toward the Humvee that had exploded the IED. They could see that all five passengers had exited the burning vehicle, but PFC Brown also saw that each soldier was hurt. Under heavy fire, PFC Brown and crewmembers with lighter injuries moved the two soldiers with
life-threatening injuries to relative safety, where she performed triage.

Soldiers from her unit held off the attackers, who eventually began to retreat. While the medevac helicopter was on its way, PFC Brown treated the soldiers’ injuries more thoroughly. Her brave, swift response ensured the soldiers’ survival. Nearly a year later, at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, Vice President Dick Cheney awarded Spc. Brown the Silver Star for her gallant actions during combat. She became the second female soldier since World War II to receive the award.

Today there are approximately 245,000 soldiers deployed to 80 countries around the world. It is no secret that the U.S. Army is busy in many places, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Kosovo and the Horn of Africa. All of our soldiers are doing a phenomenal job in myriad missions we could never have imagined 15 or 20 years ago. Be it in Iraq, Afghanistan or anywhere else they serve, America’s soldiers continue to exceed every expectation with courage, dedication and selfless service.

Who are these more than 1 million men and women who serve today, who represent the best of their generation and of our society? They are the individuals who are willing to be the strength of the nation. Our soldiers come from all walks of life, from all across America. They represent many different races, ethnicities and religious groups. Our diversity is our greatest strength, and knowing how to communicate with people from all ethnicities, cultures and backgrounds is critical to our success.

Today’s soldiers share a common bond with the American veterans who have gone before them. They swear to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. America can be proud of the 170,000 sons and daughters who stepped forward last year and made the commitment to join the U.S. Army, an army at war. In July, we celebrated the 35th anniversary of the all-volunteer force. We can be proud that America’s sons and daughters continue to volunteer to serve our nation.

Since 1775, generations of American citizens have worn the uniform of a soldier and fought at home and on foreign soil. All the while, our soldiers symbolized the nobility of selfless service and sacrifice. Soldiers and veterans have stormed the beaches of Normandy and battled in the mud in Bosnia. They fought through frozen winters in the mountains of South Korea and sacrificed themselves in the steaming jungles of Vietnam.

Today our soldiers chase terrorists over the 12,000-foot mountaintops of Afghanistan and carry out precision attacks in the cities and towns of Iraq. The men and women of our Army have protected millions of Iraqi and Afghan citizens as they voted. Now they are building roads, bridges, schools and hospitals, and are providing water and electricity to the people of these nations. The mission and the theater of operation may change, but throughout the world, our soldiers are still those boots on the ground who answer the call to duty.

The strength of our Army comes from more than just our soldiers and civilians. Our family members serve as inspiration and support for warriors during this critical and challenging time in the nation’s history. Families communicate through e-mail, video teleconference, phone calls, letters and care packages to maintain their positive influence in soldiers’ lives through periods of separation.

Over the past year, in support of our family members, we instituted the Army Family Covenant and Army Community Covenant. In fiscal year 2008, family programs re-
ceived well over $1 billion in funding. We owe our soldiers and their families a quality of life commensurate with the quality of service they provide to our nation. My thanks and admiration go out to all families who keep the home fires burning for all deployed soldiers.

Today’s soldiers, embracing the Warrior Ethos and our Army Values, are expertly trained, well equipped, adaptive, competent and confident. They are more than soldiers—they are culturally astute leaders and diplomats, representing the United States all around the world. They are able to handle the full complexity of 21st-century warfare in this combined, Joint, expeditionary environment, which is highly competitive and very challenging. Like Spc. Brown, these ordinary men and women have always done—and will continue to do—extraordinary things.

Another exemplary soldier is SSgt. Jon Hilliard, who served as a squad leader with the 5th Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division, in Baqubah, Iraq. While undertaking a clearing mission in Baqubah in March 2007, SSgt. Hilliard was thrown 6 feet into the air when a buried IED exploded beneath his unit’s Stryker. SSgt. Hilliard sustained torn ligaments in his leg, but he was aware that soldiers were still trapped in the vehicle, which was quickly filling with smoke. Insurgents ambushed immediately, sending heavy machine-gun fire their way.

Alone and vulnerable on top of the Stryker, SSgt. Hilliard was afraid that his soldiers would get hurt as they exited the vehicle. He decided to make himself a target to provide a diversion for the attackers. He had lost his weapon, but he cut free an M240 machine gun that had become tangled in camouflage netting and began to return fire on the insurgents. For about three minutes, SSgt. Hilliard fired at the enemy, allowing the seven injured soldiers in the vehicle to be pulled to safety.

After the successful evacuation, SSgt. Hilliard maneuvered to the ground and led his squad in the fight, which lasted about another 20 minutes. During the volley of fire, SSgt. Hilliard ran without cover across a clearing to retrieve a weapon, another instance of bravery. SSgt. Hilliard’s actions—courageous, brave and selfless—resulted in the defeat of multiple enemy forces and led to the successful recovery of his soldiers and their weapons and equipment. In February, SSgt. Hilliard received the Silver Star for his efforts.

Like those of Spc. Brown, SSgt. Hilliard’s actions against armed combatants were in keeping with the highest traditions of our Army and clearly displayed our Warrior Ethos. He placed the mission first, he never accepted defeat, he never quit and he never left his fallen comrades. I want to thank all of the soldiers, family members, Department of the Army civilians and contractors who remain the strength of the nation as they serve America in these challenging times. God bless the legacy and service of all of our soldiers and veterans. America is the land of the free because we are the home of the brave. Army Strong. Hooah!

U.S. Army Chief of Staff Gen. George W. Casey Jr. signs the Army Family Covenant in 2007. SMA Preston (left) signed the document shortly afterward.