



‘DT’ put duty before his own agony – and earns Sox finalist honors in MLB program

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
Posted Friday, August 23, 2013*

(Editor’s note: One of the accompanying photos is graphic showing Israel Del Toro’s burn injuries.)

If any serviceman deserves the Medal of Honor, it should be U.S. Air Force Sgt. Israel Del Toro, Jr.

So many throughout United States history have accomplished heroic deeds in wars. But has anyone else been engulfed in a living hell like southwest suburban New Lenox native Del Toro? His body was almost totally on fire after an IED explosion destroyed his truck. And yet after dousing the flames, his injuries grievous, Del Toro had the presence of mind to fulfill his duty to direct the calling in of an air strike to save nearby service personnel under fire in Afghanistan.

“The guys up on the mountain were asking, we need CAS (close air support),” Del Toro recalled. “I told the other scout guy, get on this frequency, repeat exactly what I need you to do so we can get some air strikes in here for our guys.”

Immediately after the call was made and the strike ordered on Dec. 4, 2005, Del Toro – known as “DT” to his service buddies -- was evacuated to a forward hospital. Assured he would be all right, he was put into an induced coma so medical personnel could begin to treat the third-degree burns over 85 percent of his body. Del Toro woke up four months later in Brook Army Medical Center in San Antonio.



Israel Del Toro's reward as Sox finalist in the "Heroes" program was being introduced next to Sox ace Chris Sale at the All-Star Game.

“I was told the air strike was called in,” he said. “Every single one of those guys came back. I really didn’t know if it worked until April (2006) when I was in therapy. They said, ‘You freakin’ saved the guys.’”

That was his job anyway as a JTAC – joint terminal attack controller. Del Toro is a member of an elite Air Force unit that works on the ground with Army and Marine combat troops to identify targets and call in supporting air strikes from attack helicopters and jets. For his efforts, he was awarded a Purple Heart and Army Commendation Medal.

Del Toro should have received more. But he doesn’t care. His reward was being re-united, disfigured but still whole mentally and spiritually, with wife Carmen and son Israel III (“Little DT”), just turned 11.



Carmen Del Toro (from left), then-President Bush and Israel Del Toro, Jr. meet after the latter had recovered. Israel Del Toro III ("Little DT") is in front.

First 100 percent disabled man to re-enlist

The cherry on the sundae was a return to active duty to train future JTAC’s amid the blistering heat at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio. Shielded by strong sunblock and careful to constantly hydrate due to his post-burn condition, Del Toro goes out on five-mile walks in the drills. He’d gladly return to combat, but his superiors respectfully declined due to his condition. He now uses his experience, his wits and his motivation to train those who will follow in his stead.

“On Feb. 8, 2010 I became the first 100 percent disabled airman to ever re-enlist in the Air Force,” Del Toro said. “If they would let me, I would deploy in a heartbeat. But I can be an instructor at our school.”

No wonder Del Toro, a diehard White Sox fan, became the South Side team’s finalist in People Magazine’s “Tribute To Heroes” program. Each of the 30 major-league teams nominated a worthy veteran or active-duty person to appear in a big ceremony at the All-Star Game in Citi Field in New York.

Del Toro became known to the Sox in the summer of 2006, when he was brought from San Antonio to the Ballpark At Arlington to meet Ozzie Guillen, Mark Buehrle, A.J. Pierzynski and Joe Crede. Sister Christina Del Toro nominated him for the “Tribute To

Heroes” program at the All-Star Game in New York. Joining Cubs finalist Richard Bennett at Citi Field, Del Toro was introduced next to Sox ace Chris Sale in pre-game ceremonies. Two weeks later, on July 30, he was introduced to the U.S. Cellular Field crowd as the third-inning military honoree during the much-hyped Alex Rodriguez-oriented series with the Yankees.



Then-President Bush visits Israel Del Toro, Jr. when he got his initial treatment at Brook Army Medical Center in San Antonio.

“I have had more than 130 surgical procedures,” Del Toro said. “This past January I had a big surgery that opened up my right hand. They re-grew my skin. My left hand needs a procedure. Now, stuff is more cosmetic, trying to make me look somewhat normal. The only reason I go through this is for my son.

“It doesn’t bug me,” he said of his post-burn appearance. “It upsets more my son and my wife when they see people stare. I ignore it. Children are more polite than adults because they come up and ask, ‘What happened, sir?’, compared to an adult who will keep walking, then turn around and stare.”

Del Toro has a strong sense of duty all around. He lost both parents by the time he was 14. He was raised by his grandparents in the family home in New Lenox, where he attended Providence Catholic High School. Del Toro started at the University of Illinois in Champaign. But one day while watching TV, he saw an Air Force commercial.

Joins Air Force to be a ‘bad ass’

“I felt nobody from my family ever joined the military,” he said. “It would be cool to be the first one to join. I didn’t want to join any other (branch). All my friends said if you join anything, join the Air Force, they have the best-looking girls.

“I wanted to do something challenging. Something I could tell my grandkids, what did you do? I could tell them grandpa was a bad ass.”

Oh, he was. Enlisting in 1997 at 22, Del Toro joined the Air Force’s only ground combat unit – the Tactical Air Control Party or “Tac P’s.” “There’s about 800, 900 of us – it’s a volunteer job,” Del Toro said. The unit requires six months of special training and three more years working under more experienced personnel to be fully qualified.

Here is the Air Force’s own on-line description of a JTAC’s duties:

“Calling in an airstrike on just the right target at just the right time can change the tide of battle. Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) Specialists imbed with Army and Marine units and do just that. One of the few true front-line combat jobs in the Air Force,

TACP Specialists are known for their ability to bring overwhelming firepower to the battlefield in the form of artillery and air strikes. The training is physically, mentally and technically intense as you'll have to be able to operate under any environmental condition alongside some of the military's most elite special operations team.

Career tasks:

- Ensure specific ordnance or bombs are delivered on target.
- Brief attack pilots as they enter the target area, ensuring they are aware of the target and friendly positions and other pertinent information.
- Learn the systems and procedures necessary to provide the U.S. Army and allied forces with tactical air support.
- Operate and maintain cutting-edge technology, including communications, computers, digital networks, targeting and surveillance equipment and various special purpose tactical vehicles.
- Develop combat-related skills such as map reading, compass usage, enemy target location, survival, escape and evasion techniques, small unit tactics, camouflage techniques and hostile environment operations and master a variety of weapons.

The job description seems one cut below the skills required of the elite of the elite – Navy Seals. Once trained, Del Toro did not sit around waiting for action. His first deployment was in Bosnia in 2001. For security reasons he cannot yet talk about that operation.

His unit penetrated Iraq two months before the U.S. invasion in March 2003. They skulked around, gathering intelligence for the eventual air strikes.

“When you’re a small unit, it’s not that hard to get in,” Del Toro said. “It’s harder taking fire and getting out. We had good camouflage. We stayed away from populated areas.”

He was injured on his fourth deployment. Del Toro never turned down a deployment, which was all voluntary. “This is what I joined for,” he said.



Israel Del Toro, Jr.'s truck after it was blown up by an IED in the road.

Del Toro and fellow troops went up against a Taliban enemy with “Spiderman” physical talents.

“These guys could be barefoot, they could be in flip-flops,” he said. “I swear to God, they could run up these mountains (almost vertically) like no one I’ve ever seen in my life. It’s unbelievable.”

IED part of ambush

In an armored truck with his lieutenant driving and a buddy manning the gun turret on top, Del Toro was returning to his base when they ran into an ambush. He figures the IED was activated when the Taliban knew they’d have to use the road on the return trip. The enemy also targeted the JTACs first, as they have done with service dogs who sniff out IEDs.

About 200 meters past a creek, the IED blew up under the truck. On the right passenger side, Del Toro was hit the worst.

“I felt something on my left side,” he said. “I thought, ‘Holy crap, I’ve just been hit.’

“It was my bad day.

“I got out of the truck and tried to get to the creek. I was on fire from head to toe. I got to get to the creek to extinguish the fire. I collapsed about halfway. I thought I was going to die here, I thought I’d never see my wife and my son again. The ‘LT’ (lieutenant) says, ‘You’re not going to die here, DT.’ He threw some dirt on me and helped me up.

“We both jump in the creek. The sound I heard is when you put a hot skillet in cold water.”

Del Toro put out the fire, but his ordeal was just starting.

“I got out of the creek,” he said. “I remember looking at the LT and saying, ‘Man, that sucked.’ The LT said, ‘DT, you trying to be funny?’ I said no, I got hit, I was on fire, I had to jump in a freezing cold creek. It sucked.”

As his condition worsened by the second as a medic in a trailing truck attended to him, Del Toro asked the scout to call in the air strike. His radio call sign was “Gunslinger.”

“When I got hit, the only pain I felt in my left leg,” Del Toro said. “They cut off my clothes. My gunner was in a lot worse shape than me, I thought. He was blown off the truck, and the truck rode over his leg. I looked at myself. I got all my fingers, all my parts, I’m good.

“I finished having the other guy repeat everything he needed to say to get the air strike. Then I felt like I couldn’t breathe. I got tired. The medic tried to keep me awake. We don’t let guys fall asleep after being badly injured – they don’t wake up. He kept trying to keep me up: ‘DT, DT, stay up, stay up...’

Strange motivation from medic

“He said the strangest thing to me, ‘C’mon, DT, fight for your son so you can teach him to be a pimp.’ He says it again. When he came to visit me, I asked him why would you say that to me? You do whatever you can to keep your guys awake. It worked. It kept me awake ‘till the helicopter came.

“I remember getting on the helicopter. I remember going to the FOB (forward operating base). I remember going into the field hospital there and seeing the some of my Air Force teammates and some of my Army teammates. The doctor cut off my watch and tells me you’re going to be OK.

“That was Dec. 4, ’05. Then it’s March ’06.”

When Del Toro woke up from his coma in San Antonio, he thought it was still December and he was still in Afghanistan.



Before the incident that changed his life, Israel Del Toro, Jr. on patrol flanked by two friendly Afghan villagers.

Just a little more than one month prior to the incident, Del Toro watched his Sox win the World Series in Houston via satellite. His ties with his favorites helped with his long-term therapy. Guillen always greeted him. Fortunately, the former manager wasn’t on patrol with Del Toro – the JTAC would have had to tape his mouth to avoid tipping off the enemy. Del Toro went to spring training.

Following the Sox through their most difficult season in nearly three decades is a snap compared to his own eight-year journey since their World Series victory. There’s no baseball dynasty at The Cell, for sure. Yet for one of the team’s fans has won every year since, in a kind of dynasty of real life.

His opponent knocked down the JTAC, but he bounced back up. They haven’t beaten Israel Del Toro yet.