

# A Soldier's WELCOME BACK

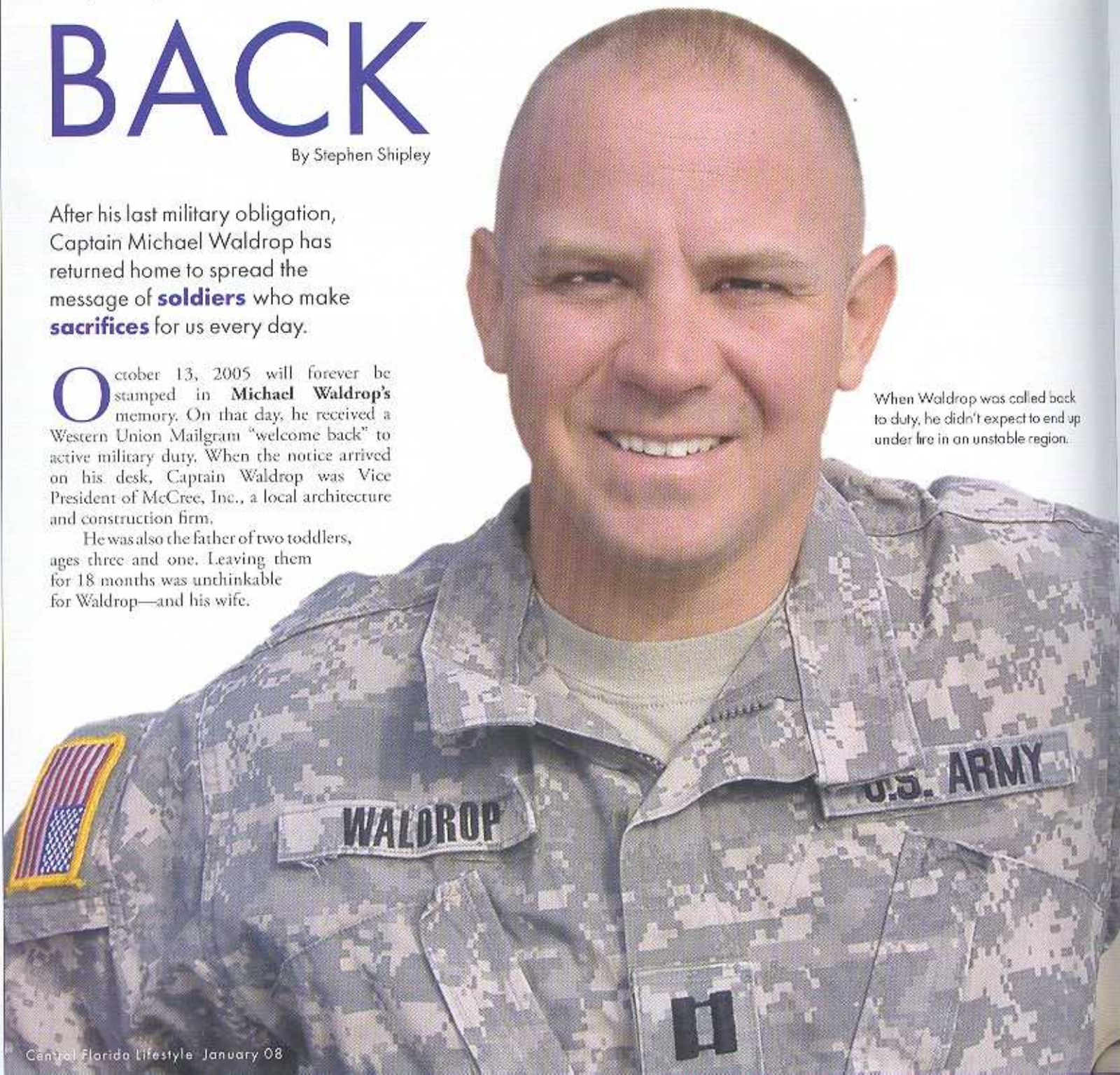
By Stephen Shipley

After his last military obligation, Captain Michael Waldrop has returned home to spread the message of **soldiers** who make **sacrifices** for us every day.

October 13, 2005 will forever be stamped in **Michael Waldrop's** memory. On that day, he received a Western Union Mailgram "welcome back" to active military duty. When the notice arrived on his desk, Captain Waldrop was Vice President of McCree, Inc., a local architecture and construction firm.

He was also the father of two toddlers, ages three and one. Leaving them for 18 months was unthinkable for Waldrop—and his wife.

When Waldrop was called back to duty, he didn't expect to end up under fire in an unstable region.



## ONE LAST OBLIGATION

Waldrop was born in Charleston, South Carolina, where he lived until entering Clemson University. In 1995, he completed Officer Candidate School, was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant and joined the South Carolina National Guard—before graduating from Clemson in 1997.

In 1998, he retired from active to inactive, ready reserves and moved to Orlando, where he met **Marnie** on a blind date the next year. They married two years later and currently live in College Park with their two children, **Marilyn**, 5, and **Tommy** (Michael, Jr.), 3.

But before Waldrop completed his military obligation, he received his notice to reenter active duty and reported to Camp Shelby, Mississippi for a six-month train-up in preparation for deployment to a coalition military base in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan. His specific mission was to train, mentor, advise and lead an Afghan rifle company of more than 60 soldiers, all volunteers, being paid \$100 a month to fight the Taliban.

## UNDER HEAVY FIRE

Initially, Waldrop thought he would be stationed in this stable area of northern Afghanistan. However, within days of arriving, his brigade was convoyed to Kandahar Air Base in a very unstable region in south Afghanistan.

Forty-eight hours after arriving, Waldrop, along with two other Americans, SSG Clay Aldrich and SFC Geoff Miotke, were leading a platoon of 25 Afghan soldiers towards the Punjwai district, southwest of the city of Kandahar. Their orders were to liberate and hold an area known to be occupied by Taliban fighters.

As they were leaving the base, they drew heavy enemy fire. Waldrop's first reaction was to jump out of the truck and control his soldiers. Not knowing how the battle would progress, his main objective was to not waste ammunition—a wise decision since they were pinned down by sniper fire for three days.

Their target was a compound held by Taliban fighters, who were equipped with sniper rifles, rocket propelled grenades and AK-47s, firing from the rooftop while protecting their cache of ammunition and weapons. When three attempts to storm the building failed, a U.S. drone was called in to deliver a Hellfire missile. After this failed, Apache helicopters strafed the area. Still, the snipers survived.

The pinned down troops called in artillery rounds, but to no avail. On the third day, more helicopters came in, firing missiles and rockets. This barrage struck the cache, detonating the hidden ordnance. Since the troops were being held at bay just meters from the compound, the exploding munitions put them at risk.

## A WOUNDED TRIP

Waldrop and a Canadian soldier were wounded in that explosion. Waldrop was hit by flying shrapnel, which tore into his right thigh; today, he describes the sensation as the feeling of being hit by a scorching hot sledge hammer. The Canadian soldier took several hits to his abdomen.

A buddy carried Waldrop approximately half a mile to medics, where he was airlifted to a hospital. After his surgery, he called home, and his daughter answered the phone. He chatted with his little girl until she put her mother on the phone, and then Michael told Marnie he had been wounded.

He was flown back to Orlando for two weeks before being returned to Kandahar, where he led two more platoons of Afghan soldiers into battle.



After being wounded in Afghanistan, Captain Michael Waldrop returned home to yellow ribbon support from his College Park community.

## COMING HOME

Waldrop returned home permanently this past Father's Day. Awarded the Purple Heart for being wounded and the bronze star for valor in battle, Waldrop has been honorably discharged from the service and now has a renewed sense of patriotic purpose: to convey the message that this country is at war.

"One hundred percent of the guys I was with believed that the sacrifices we were making in support of freedom were worth it," Waldrop says. This is the message he has developed into a program he presents to interested groups.

Now that he's home, Waldrop has seen the support of our community that was reaching out to him in Afghanistan—and waiting here for his happy return. When he came home this June, trees in his neighborhood sported yellow ribbons, showing support from his family, church and co-workers, all of whom he credits with strengthening him throughout his ordeal.

Welcome back, soldier! ■

Waldrop is now home with his wife, Marnie, and his children, Marilyn and Tommy, who greeted him at the airport—and haven't wanted to let go of him since then.

