John Chapman, His Life

By Dan Schilling

NOTE: This article is adapted from the forthcoming book "Alone at Dawn" by Dan Schilling and Lori Chapman Longfritz.

John Chapman died violently. Given his chosen profession as an Air Force Combat Controller and his choice of assignment to the 24th Special Tactics Squadron (STS), the prospects of that outcome were highly probable while serving in the United States Air Force. However, it's not his death and the devastating trauma he experienced in his last hour of life that turned his mountaintop isolation into heroic self-sacrifice, but what he did in the 71 minutes after his SEAL team left him, believing he was dead, until the moment he was struck by the final bullet that ended his life. The first Air Force Medal of Honor in 47 years came about through his actions during that brief eternity, alone and forsaken.

It can be accurately stated John's decisions and actions were the result of thousands of hours of training and years of expertise understood by few individuals in or out of the military. The training may have determined his capabilities and martial accomplishments, but that is not what made John Chapman the man he was. In actuality, what delivered John to that frozen and fateful summit where he saved the lives of 23 comrades at the cost of his own was both humbler and more complex. John exhibited from the earliest years of his childhood, a commitment to defending others that foretold a life of selflessness.

Kindergarten is where most children experience the world of others for the first time and where John first chose to stand for someone who couldn't defend themselves. It was everyone's first day and Billy Brooks was confronted with a double whammy, not only was it day one at Southwest Elementary, but he was the new kid in town. So, when he said the wrong thing to a classmate she punched him in the stomach, dropping the new kid to his knees. John saw the fray from nearby and stepped in front of Billy, facing down the assailant and holding up his hands as if to say, "Hold on, here." John Chapman was five years old. The friendship forged that day followed the two boys into adulthood.

That first stand for justice would repeat itself throughout his formative years. By 1979, John established himself as a young man possessed by an innate ability to tune into the feelings of others that transcended the attitudes of the times and ran counter the instincts of most teenagers. Some of his unconditional friendships in high school weren't looked upon with approval by other members of John's "jock squad," the student athletes and cool kids. As a standout athlete he blended easily with the "in" crowd, however, accepting those with disabilities was not part of the "in" social program. Those with special needs were shunned and harassed in the hallways, as often happens with teens, particularly in those days.

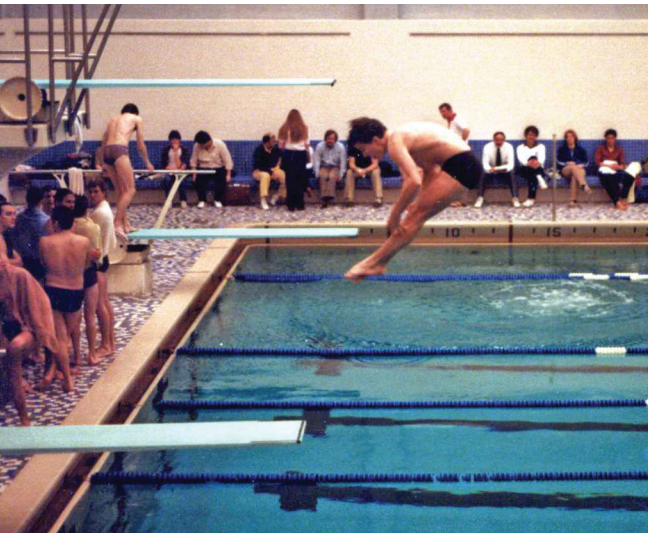
Cara was one such girl and knew John because he always took the time to say hello and ask how she was doing. One day, kids jostling her in the hall gave her a particularly cruel hazing. She escaped around a corner as John was approaching from the other direction. When he saw her, he gave his usual jovial, "Hi!" She was so rattled by the bullying that she lashed out, "F*** you, Johnny Chapman!" and stormed down the corridor. In the hallway kids laughed or looked away in embarrassment, but John pursued her, matching her quick pace. She tried to make him go away, but he wouldn't. Instead, he calmed and comforted the distraught girl, sitting with her until after the bell rang and her tormentors had gone.

Later at Windsor Locks High School, freshman Kelly sat behind the school on the cold, cement base of a light pole. It was September 1980, several weeks into the new school year and it was Kelly's first day back after a two-week absence. Her father died, but she wasn't ready to be back at school, so she escaped to the solitude of the light pole. Her agony was overwhelming, and she sobbed uncontrollably and didn't hear someone walk up until he was beside her. She didn't want to talk to anyone and he didn't force it; he just sat next to her, put his hand on her arm, and let her cry. After a bit, he introduced himself, "I'm John, how can I help?" He was a sophomore, a year ahead of Kelly and did not know her, but she knew who he was. Even though he was just in his second year he was already a star on the school's diving team competing at the state level. Through halting sobs Kelly told him about her father and said she wanted to go home. She lived across town and it was still school hours, but he told her he would walk her home when she was ready. They talked for a while and instead of going home, he escorted her to the nurse's office, leaving her with a hug.

Twenty-two years later, at John's memorial service in Windsor Locks,

Kelly shared her story with his family. She'd never mentioned her encounter with John to anyone but felt his family, especially his mom Terry Chapman, needed to know how much he had impacted her life through that single act of caring. She told Terry, "I will never forget the kindness shown by this young man, actually still a boy, to a stranger that he saw in pain and couldn't just walk away from. John was someone who made an impression on me and affected my life in a way I don't think he ever realized. I will never forget him."

John's affinity for defending the defenseless and disadvantaged was offset by his fierce competitive nature. Tom Allen was the coach of the high school dive team in 1977 and John's older brother, Kevin, was a member. John was only in the eighth grade but he watched Kevin learn to perfect his dives from the one-meter springboard. Kevin was very aggressive in his training and that caught John's attention. John wanted to join the high school kids during their diving practices and asked Coach Allen, if he could. The coach spoke with John's father to see what he thought. His one-line response? "He's the best athlete in the whole crew," so Coach Allen unofficially incorporated John into the team practices. As a result, when John joined the team his freshman year, he had an edge over the divers from competing schools, even the varsity-level athletes.



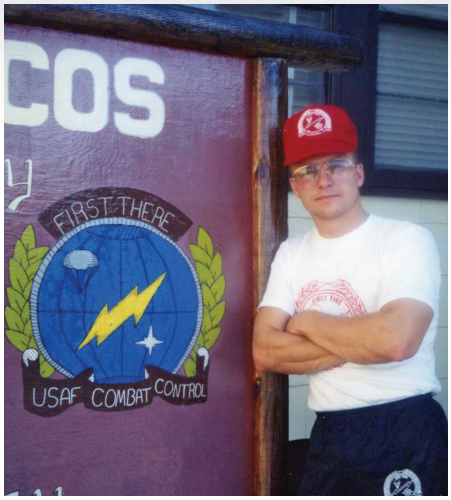
John Chapman competitive diving 1993.
(All photos courtesy of the author)

In John's first year he became fast friends with sophomore teammate Michael Dupont. Over the next two years, they pushed each other to reach for bigger and better dives as they traded placing first and second during their meets. What Michael remembers most about John was, "His competitive drive and the inspiration he gave me while we were diving together. My favorite part about our friendship was during my senior year when we kept trading places on setting new diving records. He broke the record first, then I would beat his record, and back and forth. I believe he still holds the record for high score." John became the #1 ranked diver in Connecticut and the first in Windsor Locks High School history to do so.

John graduated in June 1983 and immediately enrolled at the University of Connecticut, his life seemingly planned out. He chose engineering as a major and joined the UCONN Men's Diving Team. He was already ranked #1 in their division for the 1-meter board. He thought he would compete throughout college, complete his degree, find the right woman, followed by the right job, and John Chapman's life would fall into place.

As with many young men entering college out of high school, things didn't turn out that way. By the end of his first semester his grades were so poor he was ineligible to compete on the dive team. John was a smart young man, but as his sister Lori recalls, "Studying wasn't his 'thing;' doing was his thing." So when John lost interest in college he returned home and got a job as a mechanic and tow truck driver. He also mulled over joining the Air Force. By August 1985, John made his decision and enlisted in the Air Force promising his mother, that he would try something "safe." He chose information systems specialist to start his career. His sister said he was more to the point, "I need to do something more than stay in Windsor Locks my whole life. I want to see the world; I can't stay here."

After enlisting, John went to Lackland AFB, TX, to begin Air Force basic training. While there, he attended a Combat Control Team (CCT) recruiting briefing given to all male basic trainees. The video showed Combat Controllers jumping from airplanes, riding motorcycles, scuba diving, calling in airstrikes, and directing airplanes to assault zone landings. It struck John at the core with what he desired most, challenge and excitement. But he remained steadfast in his promise to his mother and left the road less traveled untrod.



John Chapman at Lackland AFB in 1989.

John finished tech school in February 1986 and went to Lowry AFB, CO, for his first assignment. He made the most of his new life and career, enjoying the Air Force, but soon the urge to do something more returned. Unfortunately, he was obligated to his job for a minimum of three years, but felt chained to a keyboard and a computer monitor. Nevertheless, John followed the Combat Control career field. He read about the attempt to rescue Americans held in Iran in 1980, better known as "Desert One," and Operation URGENT FURY in Grenada in 1983. He also researched the wars in Laos and Vietnam, vowing to learn everything possible while preparing for the CCT fitness test. When three years passed, he felt he kept his promise to his mother and he went ahead and submitted an application to cross-train into the CCT career field. All he wanted was a shot to prove he could do something so difficult it would elevate him to the top one percentile of military men.

John's application was approved

in the summer of 1989 and he returned to Lackland AFB to attend the Combat Control Indoctrination Course–informally known as "Indoc." Indoc is considered the toughest school in the Combat Control pipeline and it is where the vast majority of volunteers, almost 90 percent, wash out. Indoc was just the first of 10 Army, Navy and Air Force schools he needed to complete to become a qualified Combat Controller. It would clearly be a long year and a half.

John's training pipeline adhered to the pass/fail statistics exceptionally well. Of the 120 men who arrived at Lackland



John Chapman and Joe Maynor. (Photo courtesy of the author)

AFB to attend Indoc 70 were trying out to be Pararescue specialists or PJs, also an extremely difficult program. The remaining 50 men were CCT candidates. By the time the actual course started only 70 Airmen remained. Of the 50 aspiring CCT only two, John Chapman and his friend Joe Maynor, would see it to the end, making their success rate a mere 4 percent. After Indoc, John spent the next 18 months crisscrossing America to attend the Special Forces combat diver course, the Army's parachute school, USAF air traffic control school, aircrew survival school, and the Combat Control School at Pope AFB, NC. Finally, on a sweltering night in July 1990, John and Joe, the only two survivors from Lackland's Indoctrination Class 89-005, walked across the stage of the Pope AFB NCO Club, donned their red berets, and bloused their black leather paratrooper boots for the first time as the Air Force's newest Combat Controllers. The next day both men reported to their first assignment, the 21st STS, also at Pope AFB.

August 2nd, 1990 was a momentous day in modern history. Two things happened. Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, setting in motion a string of events and conflicts that continue to affect AFSOC's Airmen to last night's POD (Period of Darkness) More importantly for John Chapman, he met a young nursing student from Windber, PA, by the name of Valerie Novak. According to the future Mrs. Chapman that night, "We went dancing and drinking…we drank lots of tequila." By week's end John Chapman, along with the nation of Kuwait, were toast, but the young couple, though separated by three states, became inseparable.

By Fall 1990, it was clear America was going to war, but for John it wasn't meant to be. During a Thanksgiving horseback ride with Valerie he was thrown from a horse and ruptured his spleen, nearly dying in the process. This sidelined John for the next six months. For John the man, solace at missing America's first big war since Vietnam came in the form of his proposal to Valerie that summer.

By November 1992, they were married and on their way to their first overseas adventure to the 320th STS at Kadena AB, Japan. For the young couple it was a dream assignment. Val worked at the base hospital while John trained with his fellow CCT and PJs. Off duty they explored Japan and other countries throughout the Pacific. Yet, while the training was good, it wasn't combat. Forced to sit out the first Gulf War, John felt something was missing. There was, however, a unit that continued to get missions, real missions, not just training scenarios, during the interwar period. Some operations were splashed across headlines around the world such as Operation GOTHIC SERPENT in Somalia (popularly known as Black Hawk Down). Most of the others were masked in secrecy. The 24th STS was the only all volunteer assignment in the Combat Control community and it played a key role in these important missions.

As with everything else John did since Val came into his life, his approach to this new opportunity incorporated her. He told Val in early 1995, "I want to do this, but if you say 'No', I won't." Two decades later, Valerie remains convinced that had she said, "No," the matter would have been dropped without resentment. "But I didn't want to look back at age 80



John Chapman and Val's wedding in 1992.

and realize I'd kept him from something he wanted so badly." And he did want it badly, a necessary frame of mind, since assessment for the 24th STS is nearly as daunting as getting into CCT.

John successfully assessed and was selected for assignment to the 24th STS. He returned to Japan and announced the great news. Val was thrilled, not just for her husband, but also at the prospect of returning to North Carolina where they still

had friends at the 21st STS and would be closer to family. The latter an important consideration as she had joyful news of her own…they would be bringing home a small piece of Japan when they returned. Val was pregnant.

By October, the expectant couple was back in Fayetteville NC, happy for the overseas experience that so many service members enjoy, and even happier to be home again. They bought a house and settled in for what they believed would be the rest of John's career. On 13 May 1996, amid the high demand and steep learning curve in the 24th STS training, John and Valerie welcomed their first child, Madison Elizabeth. Valerie recalls the moment the three became a family, "The first time he held Madison, the spark in his eye was like nothing I'd seen before. It was like a kid in a candy store, he was so excited." In time Madison grew, the family collected evenings and weekends and settled into a rhythm revolving around his demanding job and travel schedule. In early May 1998, their second child, Brianna Lynn, was born, completing the small family.

By the time Brianna turned one, John had turned a corner. The girls had come to be his life and the allure of working with Delta Force and SEAL Team Six waned in the face of his new and true purpose. Val recalls, "When he was home, he was home." He preferred bathing the girls and tucking them in to having beers with the boys. "He could have killed 5,000 people at work and, when he walked in the door, you'd never have known," she reflects on how complete a transformation it was after the girls' arrival.

By the time the World Trade Center towers fell and America launched into the longest war in its history, John Chapman had already made another decision. It was time for him to offramp the military and Combat Control behind. He'd accepted that real combat experience was not something he would add to his personal journey. When 9/11 struck and America responded he was no longer even on a tactical team, instead working in the squadron's survey shop. This allowed him to be home with the girls more. The war changed everything for the 24th STS. When it emptied out in the first wave, John found himself attached to SEAL Team Six backfilling other deployed Controllers during the 2001 holiday season. Maybe his chance at war was still a possibility. Then his grandmother died and John knew his family needed him more than his nation, so he took emergency leave and returned home to help his folks with the crisis. Again, missing the opportunity to prove himself in combat.

Fellow Controller and CCT community legend Mike Lamonica recalls retrieving John from Virginia Beach and the long drive they shared back to Ft Bragg. "He had a lot on his mind, and I mostly listened," as Chappy recalled his time with Val in Kadena, living on a quiet cul de sac, sitting with other parents, watching their children play. He spoke of how he and Val approached raising the girls as a team. John contrasted his approach with that of many other Combat Controllers, who viewed family as something that came second to missions or career, and how it wasn't until Madison and Brianna were born that he recognized the error of that approach.

"My job now is to serve my country, but there's a greater thing than that. When this war is over, I'm going to dedicate myself to my family," John declared.

"You could see the profoundness of the words he was sharing," Lamonica remembers. "It was intensely personal to him, and it was clear that he and Val loved each other deeply and had discussed those plans as partners." When asked his opinion on John, Lamonica adds, "He was rebellious against authority, but that doesn't make him unique in CCT. What really stood out was his humanity and the way he approached family."

Yet it was clear that when John returned from tending to his family, he believed he needed to deploy. The chance came when he famously "Stood" on the desk of 24th STS commander, Lt Col Ken Rodriguez telling him, "With all due respect, I need to get over there now!"



Val and John and their two daughters at Virginia Beach 2001.

Recalls Rodriguez, "I don't think we were about to 'throw down'," but it was clear the commander needed to send him to war. John now had his chance to prove himself if only circumstances would allow.

On his final morning at home, he kissed Madison and Brianna goodbye and Val drove him to the Joint Special Operations Command compound on Ft Bragg, dropping him at the gate. With a quick kiss and an "I'm out," John smiled and waved as he walked through the gate. Valerie needed to dash off to work so she turned the car and drove off. They were so used to him coming and going, and the hazards of CCT, "It was just business as usual for us. I didn't realize it was the last time I was going to see him." Sadly, it was.

On 4 March 2002, less than two months later, John passed from this world and into the annuls of Air Force history. In his wake he left a legacy of kindness, compassion, devotion to duty and family. Most importantly to John Chapman would surely have been his two beautiful daughters and wife whom he loved above all else. Rest in peace brother, mission accomplished.

About the Author: Dan Schilling is a retired 30 year Combat Controller and Special Tactics Officer. His forthcoming book, Alone at Dawn, chronicles John Chapman and CCT and will be available June 25 from Grand Central publishing. Learn more or order at DanSchillingBooks.com