

Arroyo spreads message of 'hope' in face of despair

By **CHUCH CANNON**
Command Information Officer

FORT POLK, La. — Hope.

This simple four-letter word has different meanings depending on a person's circumstances. A student might "hope" to do well on a test. A young man or woman might "hope" their significant other loves them. A person undergoing medical tests has "hope" for a positive outcome.

For retired Capt. John Arroyo, one of 19 Soldiers shot April 2, 2014, at Fort Hood Texas, by Spc. Ivan Lopez, "hope" is the underlying theme of the message he shares with others.

Arroyo is the guest speaker for the Joint Readiness Training Center and Fort Polk's National Day of Prayer Breakfast, scheduled for May 5 at 6:30 a.m. in the Warrior Community Center.

Arroyo said the morning of April 2, 2014, started like most mornings for the newly minted lieutenant, who spent 15 years at Fort Bragg as a Green Beret before entering the Army's Green-to-Gold program and earning his commission as a medical services officer, with a follow-on assignment to Fort Hood.

"I woke up early for PT and headed out of my house, just outside the gate of Fort Hood at about 6:30 a.m." he said. "That week I was scheduled to attend a transportation course. I was our unit movement officer and the course would certify me to do load plans for the unit's equipment."

The class began at 9 a.m. and Arroyo said the instructor let the students out early so they could go to their units and get their units' property book.

"That way we could work on our own property in the class," he said. "We wouldn't be working on generic load plans, but on the plans specifically for our individual units. The instructor let us go about 3:30 p.m."

Arroyo said he headed to his unit's headquarters to secure the property book. Arroyo was assigned to the 61st Multifunctional Medical Battalion, part of the 1st Medical Brigade.

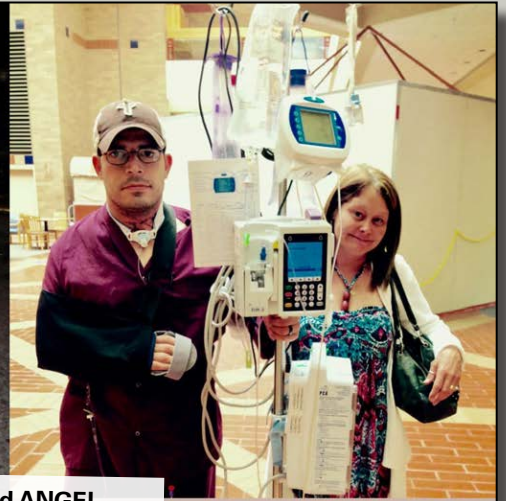
"I got there about 4 p.m." he said. "The parking lot was pretty full so I had to park near 1st Medical Brigade headquarters."

After parking his vehicle, Arroyo said he called his sister to tell her he and his wife, Angel, were planning a vacation trip to Cancun.

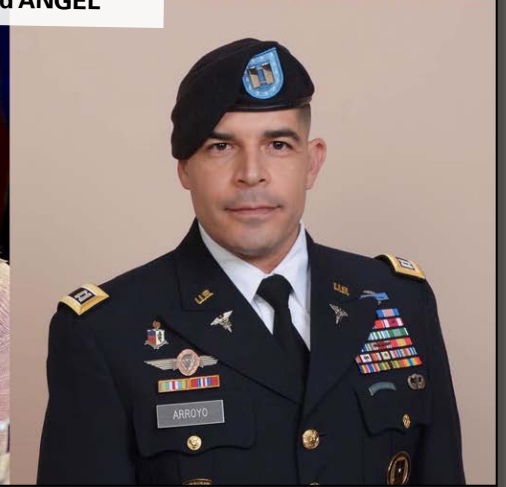
"The prior September, as I was finishing my basic officer course, my mother-in-law and father-in-law both died nine days apart," he said. "Two years before that my brother-in-law died in a hunting accident. This is what I walked in the door with at Fort Hood — a new officer with a lot of emotional issues. My wife needed to get away to heal."

Arroyo said he ended the conversation,

Please see **Prayer**, page 5



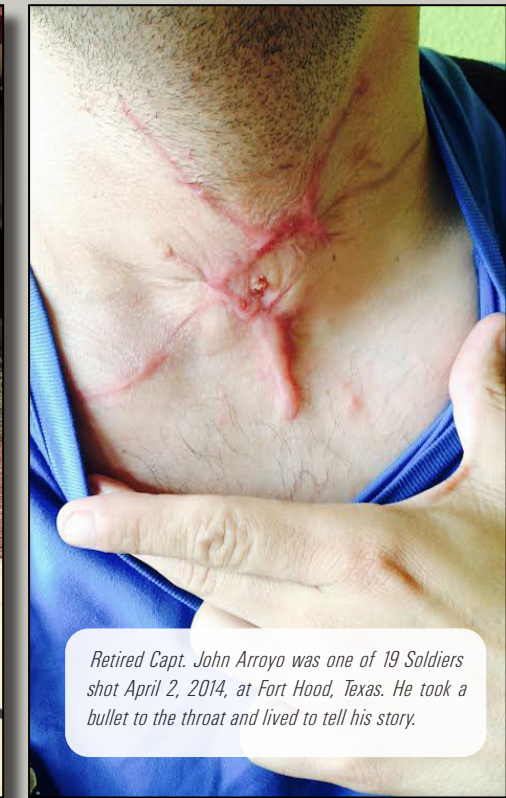
JOHN and ANGEL



COURTESY RETIRED Capt. JOHN ARROYO



Retired Capt. John Arroyo in front of his former unit's headquarters at Fort Hood.



Retired Capt. John Arroyo was one of 19 Soldiers shot April 2, 2014, at Fort Hood, Texas. He took a bullet to the throat and lived to tell his story.

Prayer

Continued from page 4

hung up and exited his vehicle. As he started making his way to 61st MMB headquarters, he said he heard shots fired.

"It stopped me in my tracks," he said. "As a Green Beret, I know what shots fired sound like. I stopped, and I began to look around."

But since he was on an Army post, behind security, he felt safe, so discounted the threat.

"I thought maybe it's a funeral detail training," he said.

Arroyo said he looked in the direction where he thought the shots came from when a car pulled up in front of him in the parking lot about 15 yards away.

"Who thinks there's danger in a parking lot, on base, behind security?" he said. "I turned my attention back to where I had heard the shots, and the next shot I heard ripped through my throat."

Later reports said the man Arroyo saw in the car, identified as Spc. Ivan Lopez, was shooting at everyone he saw.

"I never saw him raise a weapon," Arroyo said. "The shot struck me from my left to my right. The bullet went from the left side of my throat, all the way through into my right shoulder; it went through my jugular vein. It was a .45 caliber."

As Lopez headed toward 1st Med Bde headquarters, Arroyo said he turned back toward his car and collapsed.

"I'm lying there, and I know I'm shot because there are massive amounts of blood," he said. "I began to think about my family. I had tried to give my family a career, a good life. But all they really wanted was me. I remember telling my wife I want to give you everything. I was trying to achieve a career. As I was bleeding out, I wasn't thinking about my career — I thought about all that mattered most — my family. As I lay there, I heard an audible voice that came from within me that said, 'John, get up or your wife is going to die.' I shrugged it off, thinking maybe I was talking to myself, and started wondering, 'Is this where it ends? How many more breaths do I have?' Then I heard the voice again, more stern this time, 'John, get up, or your wife is going to die.'"

Looking back on that day, Arroyo said he wondered why the voice had to tell him twice.

"Because I didn't listen the first time," he said. "I didn't think that I would have had one more opportunity. I'm a man of faith, and I believe I had a divine encounter. The Army says there is a spiritual pillar in the comprehensive fitness program. For me in that moment, God was speaking to me."

But like most people would think in that situation, Arroyo said he wondered since he was the one who was bleeding out, why would God tell him to get up or his wife would die?



Retired Capt. John Arroyo does physical therapy.

COURTESY: RETIRED CAPT. JOHN ARROYO

"I believe God was telling me that if I died my wife would take her life, that she couldn't take another loss," he said.

As he started moving and getting to his feet, Arroyo said he realized his right arm wasn't working.

"I grabbed my throat with my left hand and started moving toward headquarters," he said. "From a distance I could see a Soldier coming toward me. As we drew closer to each other, I tried to speak, but I couldn't. As we drew even closer, something seemed off."

Arroyo said he stopped about 10 feet away from the other Soldier.

"That's when I realized I was standing in front of the man who had shot me," he said. "He seemed to look through me. I'm convinced it was a divine miracle; he seemed not to see me. He walked in 1st Medical Brigade, shoots three more, then shot himself. He had killed three Soldiers and wounded 16 more before killing himself."

As he continued toward the 61st MMB, Arroyo said he heard Soldiers yelling at me, "Soldier, are you OK?"

"They told me later it looked like I had a red scarf around my neck — it was blood," he said. "I was able to tell them I had been shot."

The Soldiers went to work, helping Arroyo to the ground. Arroyo later learned one of the Soldiers went to get his truck out of the parking lot because they didn't know if he would live long enough for an ambulance to arrive.

"They put me in back of the truck and rushed me to the hospital emergency room.

"One of the Soldiers in back of the truck said

he told me, 'Don't speak,' because every time I did, more blood gushed out," Arroyo said. "He said he told me to squeeze his hand instead, but the squeezes were getting fainter."

Arroyo said an emergency medical technician told him he had a look of horror on his face when he arrived at Darnall Community Hospital.

"He told me, 'I stuck my finger in your throat and said you would be OK. Then your face got a real peaceful look. You had what we call guppy breathing — very shallow just before you expire.'"

Because of the mass casualties, doctors and nurses at Darnall were all headed to the emergency room.

"Two nurses rushed me to an elevator to go to the ER," he said. "As the elevator doors opened there were two ear, nose and throat surgeons on it. They followed me to the ER and began to work on me right away."

Everything was in place where it needed to be that day, Arroyo said.

"When I obeyed the voice and got up to live for my family, everything I needed was where I needed it to be," he said. "I asked a doc if I died that day. He said, 'No, your heart kept pounding and I replaced every bit of blood in your body.'"

Arroyo's company commander, Capt. Gary Cheatwood, was also in training that day. Cheatwood, now Maj. Cheatwood and the deputy commander for Administration at Bayne-Jones Army Community Hospital, said

Please see **Prayer**, page 6

Fort Polk Garrison Chapel

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Prayer

Continued from page 5

he didn't immediately know about the shootings.

"I finished my class and went home," he said. "Shortly after, I heard on the news there had been an active shooter and the installation was locked down. I started getting accountability of my staff and John happened to be one I couldn't get in touch with."

Cheatwood said he thought Arroyo had possibly gotten out of class early and gone home.

"I called his wife, Angel, to ask if he had been home," he said. "I tried not to worry her. Then I got a phone call from the unit that said John had been shot."

Cheatwood said he learned Arroyo had been transferred from Fort Hood's Carl R. Darnall Army Community Hospital after being stabilized, via life flight, to Scott and White Memorial Hospital in Temple.

"I learned the significance of his injuries," Cheatwood said. "I knew that if Angel was going to see him again alive, I needed to do something. I didn't have time to wait for an official military response. I told my wife, we have to go get her."

Cheatwood said he and his wife jumped in their car, and headed to the Arroyo residence, about 10 minutes away.

"As I walked up to the house, the front door was open and you could see through the glass storm door," he said. "I knocked, and Angel just looked at me shaking her head, 'No,' shaking her head no, but she knew. She didn't want to open the door. I told her, 'Angel he's alive, but we must go now.' You get training on this but

it's something I hope I never have to do again."

Arroyo's story is amazing, Cheatwood said.

"I have a medical background," he said. "When trying to understand the type of injuries he had and how things lined up that day, I'd like to say it was a result of Army preparedness and Army readiness, but I don't know that I can say that. I've always been a person of faith. That experience renewed many of my beliefs, confirmed a lot of my beliefs. I wish I — they — didn't have to live through that experience. But in hindsight, the way that his life has evolved because of it, I don't think he has any regrets."

Arroyo said that for a long time his prognosis looked bleak.

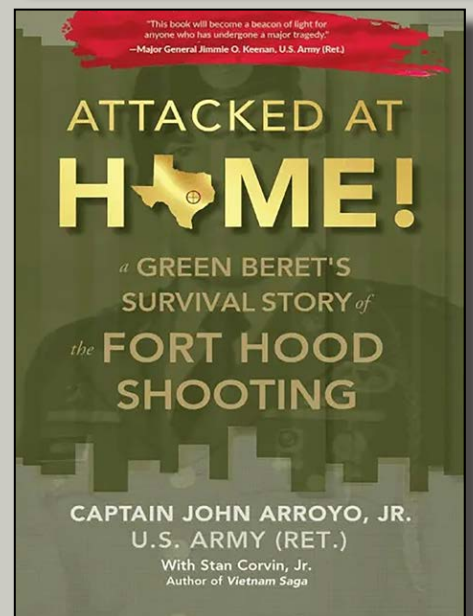
"Most everyone assumed I wouldn't make it through the night, but I did," Arroyo said.

"April 3, I came out of my second surgery and was placed in a medically induced coma. The doctors told my wife it would be a couple of days before I woke. My wife took hold of my hand to tell me goodbye and that she loved me, and I woke up."

"From that point on, I've been sharing my scars and telling people to get up," he said.

Eight years later, Arroyo admits not a day goes by that he doesn't think about April 2, 2014 and Spc. Ivan Lopez. "I've forgiven him," he said. "I wonder what life was like in his house before he grabbed a gun and shot 19 people and then himself? Had he hugged his wife and kids? I don't know. I think he was broken."

"But one thing I do know: I give all the glory to God, because I took a .45 to the throat and lived," Arroyo said.



COURTESY RETIRED CAPT. JOHN ARROYO