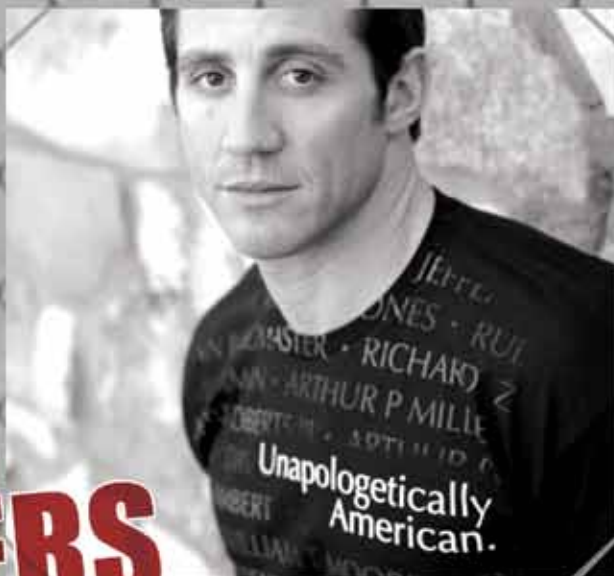




Esther Lin from Spangleforce



Kelly Crigger

SOLDIERS ON HIS SHOULDERS

MMA fighter Tim Kennedy puts the spotlight on the military, inside and outside the ring. BY KELLY CRIGGER

A standout athlete whose only real ambition was a career in cage fighting, Tim Kennedy enlisted as a Special Forces soldier after 9/11 and experienced firsthand the ego-shattering humility associated with being part of an elite unit in combat. After five years, he'd earned a Bronze Star for valor under fire while simultaneously punching, kicking and grappling his way to a winning record in mixed martial arts (MMA) fighting. But in 2008, Kennedy had to choose between two successful careers. He was a highly trained and combat-tested sniper who was in his physical prime and ready for a run at a championship belt. That's when the Army National Guard's 19th Special Forces Group gave Kennedy the opportunity to remain a Green Beret while pursuing his dream of being an MMA world champion. He recently spoke with *The American Legion Magazine* about his passion as a soldier and a fighter.

Q: You wanted to enlist after 9/11 but waited until 2003, when the Army announced the 18X-Ray program, allowing you to enlist directly in the Special Forces. What drew you to the Green Berets?

A: Not that an infantryman or tankier is not special, because they are, but with my personality and how I am, I wanted to be in *it*. I wanted the military life to be in my face. I wanted to be where the action was. First I went to the Navy to be a SEAL, then I went to the Marines to be Force Recon, and did a bunch of research on all three of them and the Air Force PJs (pararescue jumpers). After thinking about it all, I knew I wanted to be in Special Forces because of the type of people they have there.

Q: And what type of people are those?

A: Well, the very first time I really got legitimately shot at, I was coming into a hot LZ on the side of a Black Hawk in Iraq, and there was a PKM and AK-47s that started lighting us up. They couldn't see us because we were blacked out, but you could hear the rounds snapping by your head. And as soon as we got off, every dude there started running toward the muzzle flashes, including me. I didn't know what I was going to do up to that point once I got shot at, but there I was, running with everyone else toward the enemy. I knew right there I was in the right place, because I was doing what they were doing.

Q: What was your first impression of Special Forces?

A: It humbled me. We had a senior 18C named Mario who was fast. I mean, really fast. I was running around 12 minutes for two miles when I joined, and I couldn't keep up with him. I was like, "What is going on?" The first time we were out on the range, I scored in the 80s, and everyone else was in the high 90s – and I'm a good shot! It motivated me. I wanted to catch up to where these guys were so I could hold my own.

Q: You tried hard to stay on active duty while being a professional fighter, but it didn't work out. How disappointing was that?

A: I tried to figure out a way for two or three years to train and fight and travel while staying on active duty in Special Forces, and after roadblock after roadblock and extension after extension, I had to (do it or not). I knew I wanted to fight. I knew I needed to fight. But I knew I only had four or five years left in my athletic prime, so I had to get in there and fight before it passed me by.

Q: Why did you feel you needed to fight?

A: I think I'm a pretty talented operator, and I'm a good soldier, but I believe I can make a bigger difference for Special Forces, the Army, and my family in the ring than I could outside of it.

Q: You fought a few times while on active duty, but they were few and far between. How did being on active duty prohibit you from fighting?

A: My commanders never objected to me fighting, but deployments and schools got in the way of training, so there just wasn't enough time in the day for me to be a Green Beret and a good one, and a fighter and a good one, too.

Q: How supportive is your current unit, the 19th Special Forces Group?

A: It's ideal. I just fought, so now I'll do military-centric stuff for a few months like airborne jumps, sniper training, and getting back on the long gun. I really love it and would miss it if I wasn't in a position to go to the gym in the morning and then go to the range in the afternoon.



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Q: You normally weigh 220 pounds, but fight at 185 pounds. How hard is it to make that weight cut?

A: It sucks. It's compounded by how much I love to eat. The only times I see 185 pounds are when I'm seriously in a calorie deficit, so it's painful.

Q: Do you still want to make a difference not just as a fighter, but as an operator too?

A: Definitely. I think I'll go back to the military and finish my career when I'm done fighting.

Q: Do troops ever approach you and ask to train with you?

A: Yeah. A ton. I accommodate them whenever I can. I went down to Fort Hood and helped get their team ready for the Army Combatives Tournament.

Q: You always dedicate your fights to the men and women of the U.S. military serving overseas. Why?

A: For me, having the opportunity to be in the ring and grab a microphone and say whatever I want is because we have people in uniform keeping the bad guys over there instead of fighting them here. If we didn't have them, and they didn't do what they do, we wouldn't have any of the things we have here, including mixed martial arts. 🌿

Kelly Grigger is a lieutenant colonel in the Army assigned to Fort Belvoir, Va. He is the author of three books on mixed martial arts, and his articles have appeared in Military Times, FIGHT! magazine and at MMAJunkie.com. www.kellycrigger.com