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The world can change in an instant

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OFFUTT AIR FORCE BASE, Neb. (ACCNS) -- I will always remember the day the Gulf War started.

I was sitting in my sixth-grade classroom at Yokota Air Base, Japan, when the principal announced over the intercom we were at war with Iraq. Some of us started crying, some of us sat in stunned silence and others laughed. It was nervous laughter, though. For us, the people fighting in this war were not far-off camouflaged figures but our fathers and mothers.

Our lives changed dramatically in that instant. Children my age and even younger started watching the news. We didn't ooh and aah over the pretty colors when the reporter said, "The skies of Baghdad have been illuminated." We intently watched the screen for glimpses of people we knew.

It was a short war, but it felt like it went on forever. The end did not mean that everyone was coming back home immediately. We wrote letters to troops stationed in the Gulf. We baked cookies. We made valentines. We had pen pals.

Eventually our lives adjusted back to "normal," but we always lived with the knowledge that the world can change in an instant.

Now the people in uniform are my age. And they are risking their lives daily for freedom. The reality of how quickly the world can change hit me again Oct. 12.

Two hundred and ninety-three sailors were aboard the USS Cole, a state-of-the-art destroyer, to help enforce the U.N. oil embargo against Iraq. While refueling at the port of Aden in Yemen, a small boat pulled alongside it and detonated a bomb that left a 40-by-40-foot hole in the side of the ship. Seventeen sailors died in the explosion.

Twelve of those sailors were between 19 and 24 years old. I'm only 21, and realizing five 19-year-olds and two 21-year-olds died for my freedom hits home. Some of those sailors were married. Some of them had children. All of them had people who loved them.

Day after day, Americans in uniform perform the mission our nation expects of them. In an instant, the world could change, and anyone in uniform could be called to defend our freedom.

So I want to take a minute to say "Thank you." As a military brat and an American citizen, I am indebted to everyone who chooses to take the oath, put on a uniform and defend my freedom, even if it means sacrificing their own lives.

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