

*Capt. Barry Crawford, loaded down with gear, is credited with saving the lives of many Afghan and US troops.*

USAF photo



**Capt. Barry Crawford, an Air Force special operator, earned the Air Force Cross for his heroism in Afghanistan.**

# Caught in the Crossfire

By Amy McCullough, Senior Editor

**C**apt. Barry F. Crawford Jr. was caught in the crossfire. He waved his arms toward the HH-60 Pave Hawk that hovered above as he ignored the bullets pelting the ground at his feet, kicking up dirt and rocks. His headset muted the sound as a round flew just past his ear, though he definitely felt the antenna of one of his radios slap the back of his neck hard after the bullet struck it. The special tactics officer thought he had been shot. He felt for blood, but there was none. He carried on.

The landing zone was hot and it was tiny. More than a hundred enemy fighters were hidden in the jagged mountainside surrounding the remote Afghan village in Laghman province, in eastern Afghanistan. The insurgents had been accurately firing machine guns and sniper rifles down at the US and Afghan commandos for hours. Two Afghan soldiers were dead and three more were severely wounded. Crawford knew the casualties didn't have long to live, but the wind and rain combined with the fortress-like terrain made it difficult for the medevac helicopter to land. Without regard for his own life, he remained exposed to heavy fire and guided the pilots onto the landing zone.

For Crawford's actions that day, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton A. Schwartz awarded him the Air Force Cross—the second highest honor for valor, after only the Medal of Honor—at a Pentagon ceremony April 12. Crawford is the fifth Air Force battlefield airman to receive the Air Force Cross since Sept. 11, 2001, and only the third living recipient to receive the award in that time. Only seven other airmen have earned the honor since 1975.

Multiple mission participants "painted a consistent and compelling picture of Captain Crawford's technical expertise and exceptional courage under fire during the day-long battle with the

enemy," said Lt. Col. Parks Hughes, commander of the 21st Special Tactics Squadron, Crawford's home unit at the time. "They credited his decisive actions with enabling the US ground force and their Afghan partners to survive and escape an extremely dire situation."

No one expected the massive assault that took place on May 4, 2010. Crawford was assigned to Army Special Forces Operational Det. Alpha, which was partnered with a group of Afghan infantry trained to mirror US Army Rangers. The operation was part of a larger scale plan to work with International Security Assistance Force troops in a completely denied area east of Kabul that had gone a long time without a coalition presence.

## An Eerie Absence

The US forces were acting as mentors. The idea was to put an Afghan face on the operation, intended only to be a regional engagement effort. The soldiers wanted to sweep the area and talk to the village elders. The area was known to be sympathetic to the Taliban, but the assault force—including nearly 100 US and Afghan personnel—only expected resistance from some 10 fighters. Unbeknownst to the troops on the ground, though, the mission had been compromised and insurgents had holed up in tunnels and caves in the mountains waiting for them.

It turns out the assault force was ambushed by a highly capable enemy numbering roughly 10 times what they anticipated.

As the troops entered the village, they quickly realized the normal signs of life were eerily absent. The villagers should have been getting up for their first prayer. Women, children, and men should have been moving around.

"There was none of that, so our 'spidey senses' picked up and we knew something wasn't right," Crawford told *Air Force Magazine* in an interview from

Maryland where he is now assigned to the Air National Guard's 104th Fighter Squadron in Baltimore, awaiting a pilot training slot. Crawford hopes to fly A-10s for the Guard.

Army AH-64 Apaches, Air Force F-16s, an AC-130 gunship, and a manned intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platform circled overhead, passing information to Crawford. Initially, aircrews could make out 50 insurgents moving in the mountains, but that number more than doubled as the battle dragged on. After intercepting an enemy communication, it was clear the insurgents were preparing to attack once the sun came up.

The insurgents knew the US and Afghan troops had air assaulted in, but they thought they were going to drive out of the village, said Army MSgt. Sean Berk, team sergeant with the 3rd Special Forces Group who was deployed with Crawford that day. "We got information that there were about 30 insurgents a kilometer south of us putting IEDs in the road, so they were setting up down below us," said Berk.

Army Capt. Timothy Driscoll, the ground force commander, gave the signal to begin clearing the village. Within the first 30 minutes, the assault force found the first cache of weapons—grenades, rocket-propelled grenades, anti-tank mines, and some recoilless rifles with ammunition. The houses were mostly empty but were set up like defensive fighting positions, with firing ports built up in the corners. There was no doubt they had walked into a Taliban stronghold, said Crawford.

Around 5 a.m. an element just north of the village started taking fire. Immediately after, bullets began raining down inside the village. "One of my teammates referred to it as getting shot at like fish in a barrel," said Crawford. "Once the enemy started firing on us, it didn't stop for 10-plus hours. ... Wherever we moved, everyone was



Throughout the fighting, Crawford remained in constant communication with the Apaches, which were strafing the mountainside with 30 mm rounds and rockets. One of the elements spotted a large boulder, roughly 250 feet in diameter, that was serving as shelter for a couple of fighting positions. Crawford called on the F-15E Strike Eagles, which had replaced the F-16s, to lay down 500-pound and 2,000-pound Joint Direct Attack Munitions.

The shooting stopped, but only for about 15 minutes, said Crawford. That's when they realized the insurgents were maneuvering through a tunnel system dug high up in the mountains.

A few hours into the fight a heavy layer of clouds covered the mountaintops and rain started pouring down, forcing Crawford to rely heavily on the Apaches. Two-thirds of the weapons employed during the battle were danger close, he said.

"The professionalism of the Apaches' [crews] was incredible," said Crawford. Back at the base, "they were actually waking people up to come out and putting ad hoc flights together to support us. If I said I need weapons here, they didn't question it... because they knew too many lives were on the line."

**Left: Crawford communicates with his team in the field. Below: An Army AH-64D Apache helicopter fires a rocket during a training exercise. Crawford relied heavily on the Apache gunships for fire support during the firefight.**

constantly under fire. It was like running the gauntlet, like it was straight out of a movie."

Loaded with well more than 50 pounds of gear, Crawford ran down the street with his team as rounds struck the ground near their feet and walls exploded alongside them.

Overall, "we were certainly lucky that day. A lot of guys had a lot of close calls," he said.

But some weren't so lucky. The first casualty suffered a gunshot wound to the face, so one of the medics ran over to provide medical treatment.

"Then it was kind of like dominoes. The first guy was wounded; we took another guy—he was killed in action. A few minutes after that we took another wounded," said Crawford. In less than 45 minutes the team suffered five casualties—two killed in action and three more severely wounded. All were Afghans.



The casualties required airlift out, but the village was too hot with ground fire, so Crawford held off a medevac. The HH-60G Pave Hawk rescue helicopters went to get fuel and when they came back, he tried to guide them through what he called “the worst possible conditions.”

The long battle was starting to take its toll on the men. They had been dodging bullets all day. The Afghans knew their buddies were hurt and they knew some had died. They also saw the first failed attempt to land the medevac. Some of the teammates were pinned down. It was windy. It was rainy. And they were out of markings for the landing zone.

### Medical Heroics

“I knew it was a dire situation,” said Crawford. He also knew he had one shot left to get the wounded out, so he came up with a battle plan to unleash hell on the mountainside.

“Recognizing that the wounded Afghan soldiers would die without evacuation to definitive care, Captain Crawford took decisive action and ran out into the open in an effort to guide the helicopter to the landing zone,” reads his Air Force Cross citation. “Once the pilot had eyes on his position, Captain Crawford remained exposed, despite having one of his radio antennas shot off mere inches from his face, while he vectored in the aircraft to his position. ...



USAF photo by SSgt. Aaron Allmon

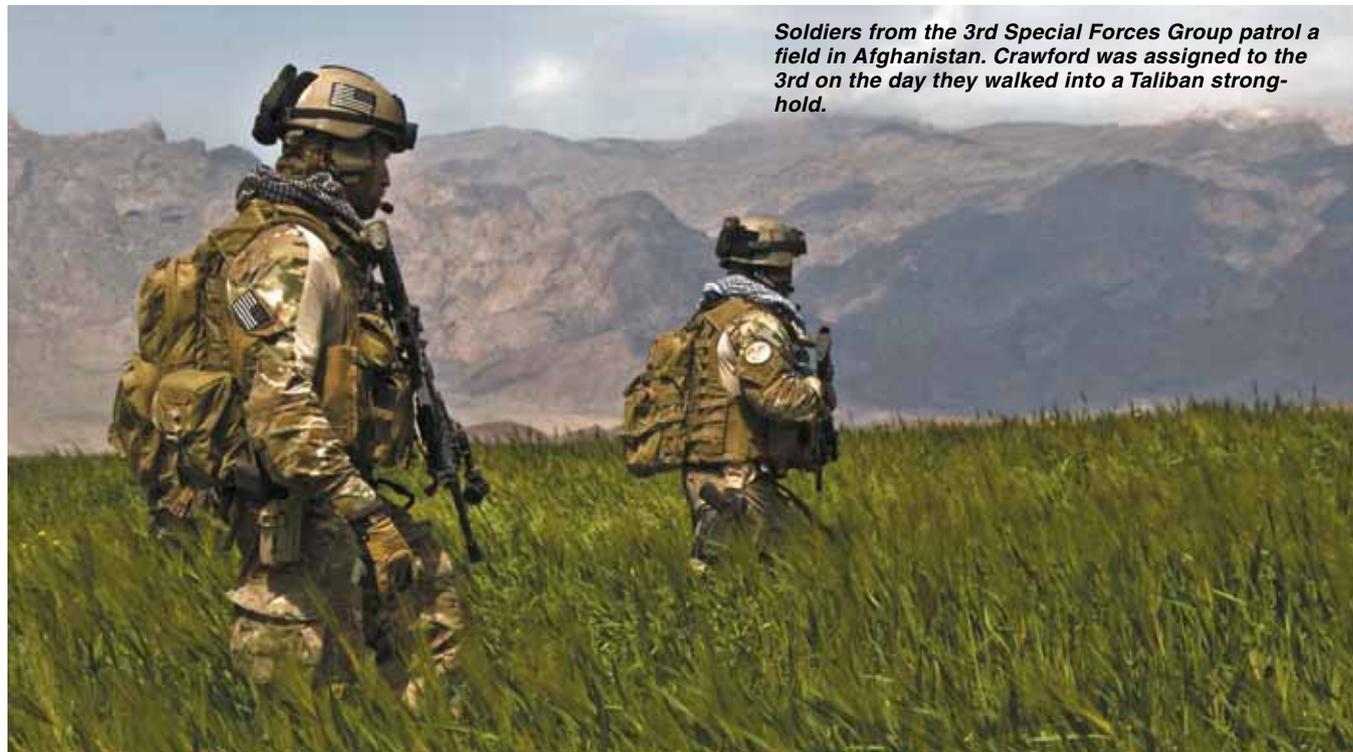
**An F-15E flies overwatch above the mountains of Afghanistan. Crawford called on Strike Eagles to lay down 500- and 2,000-pound JDAMs during the firefight.**

“Captain Crawford then bounded across open terrain, engaged enemy positions with his assault rifle, and called in AH-64 strafe attacks to defeat the ambush, allowing the aid-and-litter teams to move toward the casualties,” states the citation.

The helicopters successfully evacuated four of the five casualties despite taking at least 10 direct hits, but then Crawford had to call them off due to the overwhelming fire. There was one casualty still on the ground, and he was in bad shape.

The US and Afghan medics tending to the wounded man came under direct fire and the Afghan partner forces who were helping Army SSgt. Grant Derrick, the senior medic, carry the litter ran for cover. Unwilling to leave the wounded Afghan alone in the open under fire, Derrick stayed behind as Crawford called in gun strafes.

The Afghan had been shot in the face. The bullet pierced his nose and then exited out the side of his jaw. Derrick, who received a Silver Star for his actions that day, turned him on



US Army photo by Spc. Joseph A. Wilson

**Soldiers from the 3rd Special Forces Group patrol a field in Afghanistan. Crawford was assigned to the 3rd on the day they walked into a Taliban stronghold.**



his side so he wouldn't swallow his own blood. That's when the Afghan got shot again, this time in the lower glute. The wound was too high for a tourniquet, so Derrick packed it with medical gauze to stop the bleeding. He knew he needed to keep pressure on the wound, but the enemy wasn't letting up, so he hid the wounded soldier behind a pile of rocks and used the weight of his own body to put pressure on the wound as he returned fire. Derrick remained out in the open even after a bullet grazed his ankle.

Crawford continued calling for more strafing attacks as he looked for a safer landing zone to evacuate the Afghan. Meanwhile, an engineering team had gathered the entire cache of weapons and placed them in a single building for a controlled detonation. Derrick realized that might be his only chance to safely move the wounded man.

### Moments To Live

The explosion was so large, it engulfed the entire village in smoke. "That's how I was able to get him out of there," said Derrick. He unstrapped the patient and carried him through the maze of alleyways toward the new landing zone, using the sound of the helicopters to guide him through the smoke.

The man was bleeding out and had only a few minutes to live, but the HH-60s were out of fuel.

Crawford began communicating with a conventional Army Black Hawk overhead. "I said, 'I'm not going to lie, it's really nasty down here, but we still have

a commando on the ground. He just got shot again en route to the HLZ and the senior medic is laying on top of him providing him with medical treatment and trying to block him from getting hit again,'" said Crawford. The Black Hawk came in and successfully evacuated the last wounded commando without taking any direct hits.

Driscoll, the ground force commander who would receive a Bronze Star with Valor Device for his actions that day, called headquarters and requested a quick-reaction force for support. As the

team landed a couple kilometers west of the village, they too immediately came under fire, so they stayed in place to secure the final landing zone. Crawford split the air assets to provide them some cover. At this point, there were more than 160 US and Afghan personnel on the ground in multiple elements.

Crawford continued engaging with the Apaches, which were unleashing gun, rocket, and Hellfire attacks on the mountainside, allowing the ground force to begin the trek of more than a mile over steep terrain and out of the village. As



**Crawford—shown here in an armored vehicle in Afghanistan—and his element were attacked several times by enemy combatants firing from less than 500 feet away. The team had to fight its way to the landing zone.**



**Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz on April 12, 2012, pins the Air Force Cross on Capt. Barry Crawford in recognition of his bravery and valor during the 10-hour firefight in eastern Afghanistan.**

they were leaving, a small pickup truck carrying about three insurgents came in firing RPGs. “We engaged the truck and neutralized the threat,” said Crawford.

The US troops and Afghan soldiers bounded through streets and alleys trying to clear the way out, but the insurgents kept launching ambushes. “We knew the air was doing an incredible job because at one point the enemy said they were dying like vegetables. We kind of laughed about it after the fact because we don’t even know what that means, but they knew we were moving. We knew they were going to make one last-ditch effort to mass us and move into the village, so we had to get out of there,” said Crawford.

As they moved south, another small pickup truck rolled in firing on the troops. Crawford called in a Hellfire attack. In the explosion, the truck’s fender blew over the small ravine where they were fighting and landed on the infil HLZ. “It was up close and personal,” Crawford said.

Crawford’s element was ambushed from multiple fighting positions as they moved out of the village. The enemy was less than 500 feet away, firing from caves, houses, and a ravine that had been dubbed the “green zone” because the vegetation made it almost impossible to see in there. The men were pinned down in the open, so Crawford relocated the air assets.



**Crawford, speaking at the Air Force Cross ceremony at the Pentagon, stressed that everyone in the air and on the ground that day was valiant. He gave special mention to US Army Special Forces soldiers who fought alongside him.**

He then “moved alone across open terrain in the kill zone to locate and engage enemy positions with his assault rifle while directing AH-64 30 mm strafe attacks,” according to the citation.

**Every Person Valiant**

After roughly 10 hours of constant battle, coalition forces were running out of ammunition. The men started handing around magazines as they fought back against the insurgents.

Crawford integrated AH-64s and F-15Es in a coordinated air-to-ground attack plan that included strafing

runs, Hellfire missiles, and 500- and 2,000-pound bombs, allowing the men to successfully evacuate the village without sustaining any more casualties.

As they finally reached the landing zone, Crawford kept some air assets over the village to confuse the enemy, which was plotting its fourth major ambush of the day, according to more intercepted radio calls.

“Throughout the course of the 10-hour firefight, Captain Crawford braved effective enemy fire and consciously placed himself at grave risk on four occasions while controlling over 33 aircraft and more than 40 air strikes on a well-trained and well-prepared enemy force,” reads his Air Force Cross citation. “His selfless actions and expert airpower employment neutralized a numerically superior enemy force and enabled friendly elements to exfiltrate the area without massive casualties.”

During the award ceremony, Crawford said he was “deeply honored” and “extremely humbled” not only by the “magnitude of the award” but also by

the overwhelming support he’s received. He specifically acknowledged the Army Special Forces soldiers, including Derrick and Berk, who served with him that day and also attended the ceremony.

“We forged our friendship in battle and conflict. We sealed our forever friendship in blood on multiple combat missions and firefights,” said Crawford. “This award is an individual award, but I consider it much more than that. It’s our award. Everyone that day ... was valiant. Everyone was heroic. And thank you for being my true friends, my brothers.” ■