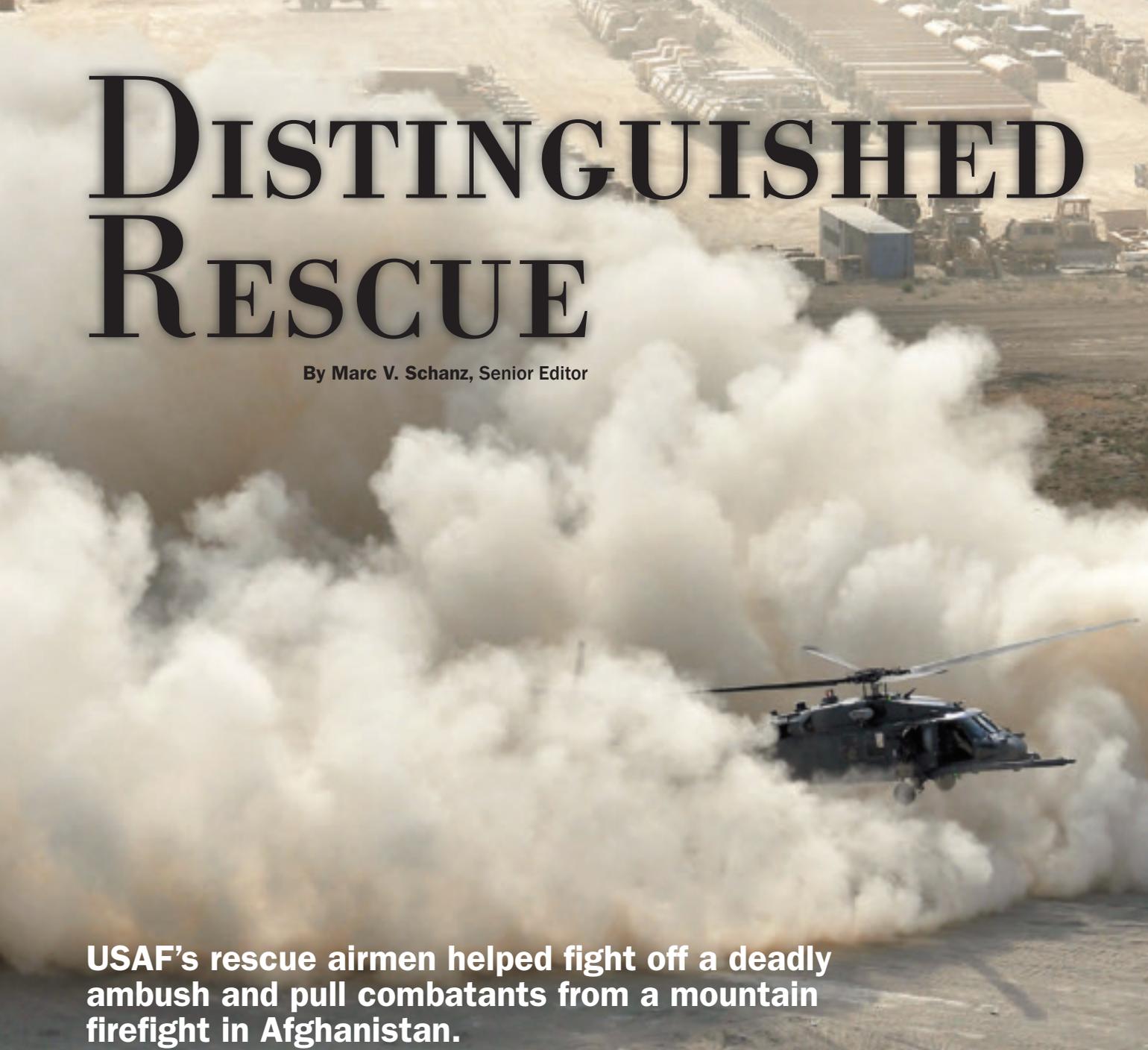


DISTINGUISHED RESCUE

By Marc V. Schanz, Senior Editor



USAF's rescue airmen helped fight off a deadly ambush and pull combatants from a mountain firefight in Afghanistan.

DURING a 7.5-hour mission, two HH-60 Pave Hawk crews made a 320-mile trip, rescuing six wounded New Zealand soldiers, an Afghan soldier, and an Afghan national and recovered the remains of two New Zealanders killed in action. They did all of this while under heavy direct fire and in temperatures sometimes rising above 100 degrees, completing their mission with just minutes of fuel remaining.

For their actions on Aug. 4, 2012, members of two pararescue crews—Pedro 83 and Pedro 84 of the 83rd Expeditionary Rescue Squadron at Bagram Airfield,

Afghanistan—received the Distinguished Flying Cross with Valor device. USAF Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III presented the awards at Kadena AB, Japan, this past August.

Welsh said it was his honor to present five of the airmen from the mission with the medal, one of USAF's highest decorations, and do so in front of their peers.

"They embody the spirit of airmen, by coming to the aid of others under the most difficult of circumstances," Welsh said. "This is what they do."

Recognized were Capt. Michael H. Kingry, Capt. Gavin H. Johnson, Capt. Matthew M. Pfarr, TSgt. Scott D. Lagerveld, and SSgt. Robert G. Wells, all

assigned to the 33rd Rescue Squadron at Kadena.

Capt. Matthew Carlisle, Capt. John Larson, MSgt. Scott Spangler, and SrA. Joshua Brown also received the DFC with Valor at other presentations.

Even within a community known for heroism, Welsh said the mission that day truly stood out as an example of airmen at their finest.

The crews of Pedro 83 and Pedro 84 came to their deployment with the 83rd ERQS that August from many corners of the rescue and pararescue jumper (PJ) community. Kingry's history is typical: He deployed seven times between 2007 and 2013 to places such as Balad AB,



USAF photo by SSgt. Christopher Boitz

Iraq; Camp Bastion, Afghanistan; and two hitches at Bagram, as well.

PJs and Pedros from across the Air Force joined the Kadena airmen at Bagram.

“Our formation was a pretty good mix of experienced aircrew and GA [Guardian Angels, the PJ complement to the aircrew], along with really sharp young guys,” Kingry said in an interview.

MSgt. Tracy Debbs, for example, was a seasoned PJ. He was the team leader for the GAs. Spangler was on his fifth deployment.

A Matter of Minutes

In contrast, Pfarr (Kingry’s copilot in

Pedro 83) and Brown (the ship’s gunner) were on their first deployments.

Pedro 84 was Larson’s flight. He was on his second deployment, as was his copilot, Johnson. Lagerveld was Larson’s flight engineer and a seasoned pro, having earned a previous DFC with Valor for a mission flown in Kunar province.

The crews had just come on duty and were beginning the daily ritual of preparing their kits when the call for help came in.

“We essentially ... were immediately launched. If the mission had dropped five minutes earlier, it would have been the other guys who would have executed,” Kingry said.

The radio came alive: “Attention on the net, attention on the net, scramble, scramble.” It meant someone faced a life-or-death situation, and the crews needed to get airborne immediately.

Kingry’s and Larson’s HH-60s spooled up and took off, headed north toward the wilderness of Afghanistan’s craggy mountains. Two New Zealand troops were wounded in a firefight with enemy forces, they were told.

As Pedro 83 and 84 sped toward the call, the mission picture started to fill in: The pickup location was farther north of Bagram than their usual range, located in the jagged mountains and valleys of the nominally peaceful Bamyan province.

The target lay in the middle of a steep mountain range, and the Pave Hawks couldn’t climb over the mountains or they’d burn all their fuel too early. Kingry plotted a course through valley passes at lower altitudes, saving fuel but extending the journey. The crew knew they’d need air refueling and called the operations center for tanker support.

Halfway there, the ops center called back: They were flying in to save five patients now, not just two. The site was likely still a hot combat zone, and coalition troops were still under fire and taking casualties.

Details slowly emerged as the two-ship of Pave Hawks approached the target. A B-1 overhead would provide close air support, and they got the frequencies so they could talk directly to the bomber.

Thirty minutes from the extraction site, Kingry helped develop a plan with the B-1 and the joint terminal attack controller on the ground for the Pave Hawks to approach, land, and get the casualties out.

“We were able to go in there with a weapons pattern. ... We didn’t want to just fly in and land ... because we knew there would be enemy presence,” Kingry said in an official Air Force interview.

The formation was lucky. There was a lull in the fighting, and the B-1 crew saw no immediate threats to the choppers. On the approach to the landing zone, however, Kingry got another update: There were now seven casualties waiting for rescue.

Steep cliffs flanked the landing zone, located in a valley. Kingry and Pfarr in Pedro 83 stayed overhead while Larson and Johnson brought Pedro 84 in for a landing, taking on three patients. After lifting off, Pedro 83 came in, picking up the other four.

They weren’t going to make it back to Bagram in a direct shot, though. The engines were guzzling fuel to stay aloft in the thin mountain air, and the crews had to dump some gas to accommodate the weight of the patients.

Pfarr watched the gas gauge level fall. “It was a very tricky balance between keeping enough fuel to get somewhere, and dumping enough fuel so that we could [extract wounded] on the site,” he said in the Air Force interview.

With fuel dwindling and their patients in critical condition, the flight had to get to the nearest forward operating base, Combat Outpost Khilagay, in Baghlan province. As they bore down on it, Kingry recalled, his PJ team told him two of the first casualties had been killed in action, and they were working hard to keep the others alive.

Once both helicopters touched down and the patients had been offloaded, Kingry looked at the fuel gauge: about 300 pounds, or just 15 minutes of flying time, left.

“I had never seen the gauge read that low and I just felt thankful that we had made it” to the combat outpost, he said. “That’s when we got the call that the New Zealand forces had taken additional casualties.”

After a hurried ground refueling, Kingry and Larson took their Pave Hawks up again. The Kiwi troops had three more wounded. The HH-60 pilots coordinated with an F-16 in the area to make a “show of force” in the valley before they returned; the jet screamed down at low level, making a deafening noise and letting the bad guys know that airpower was on the scene.

But things got worse on Kingry’s and Larson’s second trip into the valley. The fighting had picked up again. Pedro 83 filled its PJs, then covered the team from above.

Geography didn’t cooperate. On this extraction, the rescue airmen would have to use a hoist, hovering over the extraction site—leaving helicopter, crew, PJs, and



A USAF HH-60 Pave Hawk from the 83rd Expeditionary Rescue Squadron takes off from Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan.



USAF photo Scott M. Ash



USAF photo by AIC Falley B. Davis



USAF photo by TSgt. Matt Hecht



USAF photo by A1C Hailey R. Davis

casualties vulnerable to enemy fire. A rock outcropping surrounded their position.

It also meant Pedro 83 had to dump fuel again to make the helicopter lighter. That in turn gave the team even less time to carry out the rescue. As the Pave Hawks moved into position in the valley once more, the PJs on the ground skillfully vectored them in, while making sure they and the casualties could remain behind cover as much as possible.

As Kingry maneuvered his aircraft and prepared to deploy the hoist, Larson took Pedro 84 to another extraction site. He landed and picked up the remaining patient.

Meanwhile, at the first site, Pedro 83's copilot Pfarr called out on the radio: Muzzle flashes at the 10 o'clock position, about 300 meters away.

The enemy had them in their sights and let loose.

"I was holding the aircraft in a hover and looked out ... and basically I saw five or six ... bright flashes of light all aimed at our aircraft," Kingry said. He instantly pulled the aircraft around and ordered his gunner, Brown, to put a burst of .50-caliber fire in the direction of the shooting.

"I remember telling our gunner, ... 'Burst, 10 o'clock, 300 meters. Burst, 10 o'clock, 300 meters,'" Kingry said. "Then I finally just yelled 'Shoot 'em! Shoot 'em!'"

Kingry and Pfarr went into weapons pattern to destroy the threat in the mountainside, putting out the call to Larson—who was still on the ground at the second site—to come to their aid as soon as he could. Brown continued to pour rounds at targets. Carlisle, Pedro 83's combat rescue officer onboard, let out a long burst on the right gun. He had taken over the gun so Spangler could man the hoist.

Bingo Fuel

As Pedro 83 went into the weapons pattern, Kingry and Pfarr heard Larson over the radio. Pedro 84 was airborne, and both its gunners (Lagerveld and Wells) began firing torrents of .50-caliber fire at the enemy. Over the next five minutes, both Pave Hawks expended about 500 rounds of ammunition; Lagerveld and Wells delivered most of the fire.

At this point, the enemy was suppressed, but the formation had a new set of problems.

Because Pedro 83 had dumped gas to attempt the hoist, and then spent five minutes in a weapons pattern, the Pave Hawk was now below "bingo fuel," the bare minimum needed for a return to the outpost. But PJs were still on the ground, and the casualties needed to be hoisted aboard.

"We could either leave the area" and try to retrieve the PJ Guardian Angel team and casualty later, or "we could [extract] them immediately and hope to get fuel from the on-call tanker," Kingry said of the crew's dilemma. Leaving the team on the ground meant the PJs and the casualties would have to stay put for at least another 90 minutes, just yards away from the enemy.

It was not much of a choice. The formation decided to get their guys out. They had just one shot at doing it.

Johnson, Pedro 84 copilot, called in an HC-130 tanker as close as it could get to the Pave Hawks, while Kingry and Pfarr shot back to the mountainside to retrieve the team and casualties. In the next several minutes, Spangler—Pedro 83's flight engineer—performed what Kingry called "the best combat hoist that I've ever seen." The Pave Hawk had its team and the casualties off the mountain.

Flying out of the valley, Kingry and Pfarr knew they didn't have enough fuel to make Khilagay again and would have to get gas from the overhead tanker. If they didn't, the only option was a PL, a precautionary landing, somewhere in the middle of Afghanistan.

An HC-130 from Camp Bastion had gone up to refuel the HH-60s. It met up with the Pave Hawk formation at 1,500 feet above the valley floor—a dangerously low altitude for such a large, slow-moving target.

"The HC-130 guys really saved us," Kingry said. "They stayed on station throughout the entire flight and brought their entire crew down into [small-arms] and [man-portable air defense system] threat areas in order to get us fuel."

But getting the fuel into Pedro 83 and 84 would not be easy. High altitude and rough air made the probe-and-drogue refueling dicey.

Far left: SSgt. Robert Wells (r) describes his crew's 320-mile mission to rescue critically wounded coalition combatants in 2012 to Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Welsh III. At left: Welsh presented five airmen with Distinguished Flying Crosses during his visit to Kadena AB, Japan. They are (l-r) Capt. Michael Kingry, Capt. Gavin Johnson, Capt. Matthew Pfarr, and TSgt. Scott Lagerveld. The other four airmen received their DFCs at other presentations.



USAF photo by S/A. Maason L. Eilerman

The Distinguished Flying Cross is awarded for "heroism or extraordinary achievement" during flight.

Kingry approached the tanker, bouncing around a lot, and noticed the gas gauge hovering at the 300-pound level—again.

Little Cause to Celebrate

"We had to get gas or we weren't going to make it back," he said. As he approached the tanker, the air suddenly smoothed out. Before long, the drogue basket connected to their probe, and Pedro 83 took on enough fuel on its first try to get back to Khilagay.

Pedro 84, though, had trouble. The turbulence foiled numerous attempts to connect to the tanker.

Kingry and Pfarr, watching Pedro 84 run ever lower on fuel, began to think the unthinkable: about landing in hostile territory. They searched for an unpopulated area nearby that was flat enough and posed small risk of brownout—the raising of so much dust that it blinds the crew and makes landing perilous.

The PJs in the back of Pedro 83 came up with a worst-case scenario: They would load the other patient into their bird and put as many people as possible into the cabin. The remaining personnel would stay with the grounded aircraft for security and wait for them to return.

"It was not a course of action that any of us wanted to choose," Kingry said.

Pfarr described those minutes as the most harrowing of the sortie.

Then, Kingry and Pfarr looked out and saw the probe of Pedro 84 make contact with the tanker. The relief was palpable.

Johnson, on Pedro 84, remembered his flight engineer saying if he didn't connect on this last pass, they'd be screwed.

"We got lucky," Johnson said. The formation made it back to Khilagay, landed, and unloaded all its casualties, then received orders to remain at the base in case the New Zealand team back in the Bamyan mountains needed further assistance. Those calls thankfully never came, and Pedro 83 and 84 returned to Bagram.

On the somber flight home, the crews carried the remains of two of the New Zealand troops killed in action. Between the crews, there was little celebration.

"We debriefed and captured all our lessons learned so that we could pass them on to the oncoming shift," Kingry recalled. The crews had a sense that they'd just survived an uncommon mission. Their commander put in a recommendation for a single action air medal that, after review by the awards panel, was upgraded.

Kingry, Pfarr, and the others look at the experience as a testament to their community and the missions their peers have carried out over and over, for more than a decade.

"I don't think anyone in our formation thought that we had done anything that

all our other brothers in rescue would have done any differently. I think the award isn't really about our formation; it's more of a reflection of the sacrifices guys in our community have made in over a decade of service in Afghanistan," said Kingry.

The war in Afghanistan is slowly winding down for rescue crews. US military presence in the country steadily declines, and soon NATO will hand off responsibility for security to the Afghan military and government. The unrelenting deployments of the war will give way to something else, but the need for the Air Force's rescue cadre will remain.

"I think the entire concept of combat rescue is one of the things that makes the US military unique," Kingry said.

No matter what scenario the Air Force or the other services may see themselves playing out in the future, the Pedros and PJs know they will be called on to stand alert. "We pride ourselves on the fact that no matter what, we will do whatever it takes to try and get you home," Kingry said.

The Defense Department, he said, "owes it to every fighter pilot that goes into the merge, every soldier that jumps into a convoy, and every marine that hits the beach to do everything in their power to have a force dedicated to bringing them home." ■