

Air Force Posthumously Honors Pararescueman

The Air Force awarded the Air Force Cross, the service's highest award, to SrA. Jason D. Cunningham, who was killed in Afghanistan on March 4 while treating wounded troops under sniper and mortar fire during Operation Anaconda. He was a pararescue jumper--PJ--assigned to the 38th Rescue Squadron, Moody AFB, Ga.

Air Force Secretary James G. Roche and Chief of Staff Gen. John P. Jumper presented the medal to Cunningham's widow, Theresa, in a ceremony at Kirtland AFB, N.M., on Sept. 13.

The Air Force Cross is presented for extraordinary heroism.

Cunningham was the primary USAF combat search-and-rescue medic assigned to a quick reaction force sent to rescue two US servicemen trying to evade capture by al Qaeda and Taliban forces in Afghanistan. A rocket-propelled grenade and small-arms fire hit his MH-47E Chinook helicopter, forcing it to crash-land. Crew members formed a hasty defense but immediately suffered three fatalities and five critical casualties.

The citation for Cunningham's Air Force Cross reads:

"Despite effective enemy fire, and at great risk to his own life, Airman Cunningham remained in the burning fuselage of the aircraft in order to treat the wounds. As he moved his patients to a more secure location, mortar rounds began to impact within 50 feet of his position.

"Disregarding this extreme danger, he continued the movement and exposed himself to enemy fire on seven separate occasions. When the second casualty collection point was also compromised, in a display of uncommon valor and gallantry, Airman Cunningham brave an intense small arms and rocket-propelled grenade attack while repositioning the critically wounded to a third collection point.

"Even after he was mortally wounded and quickly deteriorating, he continued to direct patient movement and transferred care to another medic," the citation continues. "In the end, his distinct efforts led to the successful delivery of 10 gravely wounded Americans to life-saving medical treatment."

Cunningham was a former Navy petty officer, who, according to CMSAF Gerald R. Murray, considered joining the Navy SEALs. Instead, he became an Air Force PJ. Murray said his reason was that "while other special operators search and destroy, PJs search and save."