

Combat controller receives two Bronze Stars with valor



Master Sgt. Kenneth Huhman deployed to Afghanistan in 2007. Sergeant Huhman, a combat controller assigned to 23rd Special Tactics Squadron, received two Bronze Stars with valor during a ceremony May 7 at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. (Air Force photo)

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5/18/2009 - **HURLBURT FIELD, Fla.** -- A combat controller, who is now charged with helping fill the special tactics ranks, was presented with two Bronze Stars with valor during a ceremony May 7 at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas.

Master Sgt. Ken Huhman, a special tactics recruiter in San Antonio, received the medals for his actions during a 2007 deployment to Afghanistan while assigned to the 23rd Special Tactics Squadron at Hurlburt Field, Fla.

"His contribution to the special tactics teams, and all our combat controllers who are embedded, is just immeasurable," said Brig. Gen. A.J. Stewart, Air Force Recruiting Service commander, after he presented the medals to Sergeant Huhman. "What they are able to do, and do it under fire in the mountains of Afghanistan, is amazing."

During his deployment, Sergeant Huhman was attached to an Army Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha, or ODA. The special operations team conducted multiple combat reconnaissance patrols throughout Afghanistan's volatile Kandahar province.

This was Sergeant Huhman's second deployment to the country. The combat controller, who was a force reconnaissance Marine before joining the Air Force in 1996, also has a tour in Iraq to his credit.

"The main reason I became a combat controller was for the mission opportunities," Sergeant Huhman said.

Two such "mission opportunities" during this deployment landed Sergeant Huhman the medals.

One took place Sept. 5-6 while his team was patrolling a Taliban-controlled area of the province searching for stolen Afghan National Police vehicles.

When the team reached the target, they "disturbed a hornet's nest," Sergeant Huhman said.

They were attacked by small-arms and machinegun fire and rocket-propelled grenades from two directions. The team split up to maneuver around the enemy threat, with Sergeant Huhman's team taking cover behind a mud wall.

Using his joint terminal attack control skills, the combat controller directed a flight of F-15s to drop two 500-pound bombs 50 meters from his position. The "danger close" drops successfully eliminating enemy fighters embedded on a hilltop.

Sergeant Huhman, repeatedly exposing himself to enemy fire, continued to call in close air support for the team and coordinated a route allowing them to escape from the valley. In total, he directed the release of more than 8,000 pounds of ordnance and controlled six different attack and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft during the 26-

hour ordeal.

Despite the barrage of gunfire and length of the battle, the combat veteran maintained his composure and killed 41 enemy fighters--all without losing a single American life.

"With combat control and all the responsibilities you have, all you have time to do is think about what happens next," Sergeant Huhman said. "You're just worried about making sure your team is safe and thinking about what you do next to keep them safe."

This approach enabled Sergeant Huhman to successfully employ close air support even after his GPS broke in the middle of the battle, forcing him to revert to other, less technological techniques.

About two months later, Sergeant Huhman earned another Bronze Star with valor for a second firefight with Taliban militants.

In November 2007, the special operations team was conducting reconnaissance on a known enemy strongpoint. Using ISR assets, Sergeant Huhman was able to identify seven Taliban fighters setting up a mortar position. He called for air support and took out the enemy before they could attack coalition forces.

A while later, the convoy again found itself in a heated firefight as they moved through the terrain. Sergeant Huhman was temporarily blinded when a round impacted near his position.

However, he wasn't concerned about his own life.

"At the time I was just worried about the team," Sergeant Huhman said. "Once I couldn't see, I used the aircraft as my eyes to make sure they could see the convoy. I let them know I didn't have visual and that I had to rely on them."

The combat controller regained his site just in time to see a Taliban fighter aiming his RPG launcher at the convoy.

"He popped out of a doorway and dialed in on the vehicle," Sergeant Huhman said.

Sergeant Huhman fired off one 84mm rifle shot at the building before reengaging with his M-4 rifle.

He directed gun runs from support aircraft as the team pushed through the barrage of enemy fire toward their objective. Once there, Sergeant Huhman continued to identify and destroy enemy fighting positions throughout the village. In total, he spent 11 hours directing close air support, completely emptying the ammunition on two F-18s and one AC-130.

Later that night, the team used intelligence assets to identify a meeting of high-level Taliban leaders in a nearby cave. Sergeant Huhman called in yet another precision airstrike using two 500-pound bombs and one Hellfire missile, eliminating the enemy.

"After we took out those guys, nothing happened in that area for six months," Sergeant Huhman said.

"They're life savers," General Stewart said of combat controllers such as Sergeant Huhman. "Had it not been for the air support he was able to call in, then perhaps things (would have turned) out differently in those situations."

But the quiet professional is not quick to tout his success on the battlefield.

"I was just one of the many guys doing his job," he said. "I was in the right place at the right time. Any controller in that position would have done the same things."

However, Sergeant Huhman says he is willing to tell potential combat control recruits his story. He is one of 12 special tactics Airmen from the Air Force Special Operations Training Center embedded with Recruiting units throughout the country.

According to one of Sergeant Huhman's former teammates, those young men should listen up.

"He's definitely walked the walk," said Capt. Steve Cooper, who was Sergeant Huhman's team leader at the 23rd STS. "Recruits are going to listen to what he has to say."