

BEARDED AIRMAN AMONG AIR GUARD'S BEST by Master Sgt. Mike R. Smith, National Guard Bureau

19 JUNE 2008 - ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA - By the looks of him, Staff Sgt. Scott Geisser seemed anything but your average "clean-cut" Airman here last week with his thick brown beard and mustache. Even so, the Air National Guard's top leaders praised him as one of the six Outstanding Airmen of the Year (OAY) for 2008.

"I think somebody said that I looked like the Taliban," said Geisser, with a smile, when asked about his unusual appearance for a service member.

Staff Sgt. Scott Geisser, the Air National Guard's Noncommissioned Officer of the Year, and his fiancée, Tara, visit the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery June 16 during the Air Guard's Outstanding Airmen of the Year week. As a combat controller preparing to deploy overseas, Geisser was allowed to go unshaven and in a business suit during the week's events June 15-20 in Washington. (Photo by Master Sgt. Mike R. Smith, National Guard Bureau)

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Geisser, a combat controller from the 125th Special Tactics Squadron in Portland, Ore., is the Air Guard's Noncommissioned Officer of the Year, but he was preparing to deploy in support of Operation Enduring Freedom during the annual OAY events last week. In fact, he boarded a plane for Afghanistan immediately following the celebrations.

Geisser said his facial hair, which takes him weeks to grow, allows him to "fit in" with other coalition forces overseas that are fighting the war on terror, including the Afghani troops he will soon be working, fighting and training with.

"It makes it easier to blend in and not stick out like a sore thumb," said Geisser.

Since beards take a while to grow, officials allowed Geisser to keep his beard and wear a business suit as he toured the National Capital Region and attended several awards ceremonies and functions. With him, but clean-faced and in their uniforms, were the Air Guard's other five OAYs including the Airman of the Year, Senior NCO of the Year, First Sergeant of the Year, Honor Guard Member of the Year and Honor Guard Program Manager of the Year.

Geisser is the fourth Airman from the Oregon Air Guard to achieve an OAY distinction – an Oregon Airman has been among the last three year's OAYs, and of those Airman, all three were recognized as one of the Air Force's 12 Outstanding Airman of the Year.

"Oregon has a strong program," said Chief Master Sgt. Richard Smith, the Air Guard's command chief. "They recognize their folks well. They do a great job of documenting what they do when they deploy and submitting them for the appropriate awards when they get home."

Chief Smith, who read through 324 OAY submissions from the 54 states and territories, said that documenting Airmen that go above and beyond is crucial to give recognition deserving of their outstanding performances.

NOTE: This online-only information was added to the CCT history after publication of The Eye of the Storm – A history of Combat Control Teams.

Geisser is among a handful of combat controllers that man two special tactics squadrons for the Air Guard: Oregon's 125th STS and the Kentucky Air Guard's 123rd STS. Both squadrons include combat controllers and combat weather Airmen. Additional pararescue Airmen man Kentucky's STS.

Originally from Montana, where he first served as a Soldier in the Army National Guard, Geisser joined the 125th in 2005 after nearly three years of intense active duty Air Force training that includes full certification as an air traffic controller and some of the most demanding physical training in the U.S. military – combat controllers are trained to deploy with all other service components and provide close air support and air traffic control on austere landing fields, among other missions.

"It was a good fit as far as family and work, it was a good balance for me," Geisser said about his move from active duty to the National Guard.

At the time, the 125th was forming as a new Air Guard squadron, and the unit became operational in January, thanks in part, leaders said, to Geisser's hard work and dedication.

"We are very proud of Scott," said Lt. Col. Jim Gregory, 125th Combat Operations Group commander during the OAY awards banquet June 19 at Bolling Air Force Base, Washington. "We are looking forward to him doing great things down range for us, and I can't think of a better person to earn the award."

Officials said Geisser researched and helped purchase the squadron's initial equipment issue.

"Every little piece of gear, we had to research, find the best price and [justify] its purchasing," said Geisser, who said that just one combat controller can require more than \$10,000 in personal equipment.

Geisser also served as a flight leader during his Airman Leadership School last year at McGee Tyson Air National Guard Base, Tenn. On his return, he deployed with a combat controller from his unit and two controllers from the Kentucky Air Guard to Afghanistan for 30 days. There, the group trained coalition joint air traffic controllers on new equipment.

But when asked about his accomplishment during a tour of the nation's Capital June 19, Geisser paused, scratched his thick beard and humbly replied:

"I definitely feel that there are [controllers] that deserve it more than I do," he said. "I think it's more a reflection of the high quality squadron that I work in than it is anything that I have done personally."