

## **SPECIAL TACTICS AIRMEN RECEIVE 19 DECORATIONS FOR COMBAT OPERATIONS** (AMC News) by 2nd Lt. Cammie Quinn

**28 April 2010 - Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina** -- A Nineteen medals were presented to nine Airmen assigned to the 21st Special Tactics Squadron, 17th Air Support Operations Squadron and 10th Combat Weather Squadron during a April 23 ceremony here.



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*Lt. Gen. Donald Wurster, commander of Air Force Special Operations Command presents the Silver Star to SSgt Caleb Heidelberg, 21<sup>st</sup> Special Tactics Squadron during a Silver Star Ceremony at the Combat Control School on Pope AFB. General Wurster also presented four Bronze Star Medals with Valor, four Bronze Stars, three Purple Hearts and seven Air Force Combat Action Medals to special tactics Airmen for actions during their deployment. (U.S. Air Force Photo by Buck Buchanan)*

Lt. Gen. Donald Wurster, commander of Air Force Special Operations Command, presented The Silver Star, four Bronze Stars Medals with Valor, four Bronze Stars, three Purple Hearts and seven Air Force Combat Action Medals to special tactics Airmen for actions during their deployments.

During their deployments, Airmen from the 21st STS, here, along with Airmen from the 720th Special Tactics Group, participated in more than 1,700 combat operations leading to the capture or elimination of more than 1,900 enemy insurgents.

The Silver Star, the nation's third highest decoration for valor, was presented to Staff Sgt. Caleb Heidelberg for his actions during a firefight against enemy forces in Afghanistan in summer 2008.

In support of Operation Enduring Freedom, Sergeant Heidelberg, along with members of the Army Special Forces and the Afghanistan National Security Forces team, conducted a mounted combat reconnaissance patrol. As members of the patrol dismounted to clear a vegetated area, they were ambushed within 10 meters by enemy insurgent forces employing heavy and effective small-arms and mortar fire, injuring all of the dismounted team.

Sergeant Heidelberg became cognizant of the grave danger faced by his teammates, and exposed himself to extensive enemy fire while repositioning his vehicle to provide cover for his wounded comrades. With continued disregard for his own safety, he then stationed himself forward of the vehicle and suppressed the enemy with his squad automatic weapon, allowing his vehicle's gunner to

climb to the mounted turret, clear the jammed automatic grenade launcher and put fire on the enemy.

Sergeant Heidelberg realized members of his patrol were wounded, still exposed and in mortal danger. Without hesitation, he moved from the cover and protective fire of his position and ran toward them. Exposing himself again to heavy enemy fire, Sergeant Heidelberg carried a seriously wounded Afghan soldier back to the protection of the vehicle.

As the fight continued, he directed a complex air-ground battle to destroy the enemy with AH-64 strafing attacks and bombs dropped from B-1 and F-15 aircraft. Additionally, he simultaneously directed four helicopter sorties to both evacuate the wounded and replenish a critically low supply of ammunition.

"Caleb's actions were extraordinary and heroic, and absolutely deserving of the Silver Star," said Lt. Col. James Hughes, 21st Special Tactics Squadron commander. "Yet his conduct was not entirely uncharacteristic for a Combat Controller and Special Tactics operator. As you hear about the details of their achievements, there are common characteristics that begin to emerge."

"Today, we are also recognizing three Purple Heart recipients in conjunction with their combat decorations," said Colonel Hughes. "It is not the severity of the injuries that is notable, it's the speed and determination of their recovery. To a man, they were planning and preparing for their return to combat even before their first round of surgeries was complete. They are an inspiration to us all and each will stand before you today, well on his way to a full recovery."

Following Sergeant Heidelberg's Silver Star presentation, 18 other medals were presented.

The other recipients are:

- Staff Sgt. Joseph Byrne, 21st Special Tactics Squadron, was awarded the Bronze Star Medal with Valor, Purple Heart and Air Force Combat Action Medal.

Sergeant Byrne earned the medals during his deployment in Afghanistan spring of 2009 where during a period of about one month, his actions led to over 100 enemies killed, two wounded and 11 insurgents captured. During a battle where the enemy tried and failed three times to overrun Sergeant Byrne's position, he was shot in the neck and shoulder area.

*(Ed. Note: See following announcement concerning the Air Force Sergeant's Association Pitzenbarger Award for Sergeant Byrne.)*

- Staff Sgt. Robert Gutierrez, 21st Special Tactics Squadron, was awarded the Bronze Star Medal with Valor, Purple Heart and Air Force Combat Action Medal.

Sergeant Gutierrez earned the medals for two separate deployments to Afghanistan. His Bronze Star Medal was awarded for his actions under intense enemy fire in Afghanistan winter 2008. His Purple Heart was awarded for injuries sustained in late 2009.

- Tech. Sgt. Scott Trimble, 21st Special Tactics Squadron, was awarded the Bronze Star Medal with Valor, first oak leaf cluster, and Air Force Combat Action Medal.

During Sergeant Trimble's deployment to Iraq winter-summer of 2008, he directed more than

80 direct-action missions in Iraq. During a mission, Sergeant Trimble was engaged by the enemy from 30 meters away. Reacting quickly, Sergeant Trimble returned fire, killing one and injuring another.

- Staff Sgt. Justin Ray, 10th Combat Weather Squadron, was awarded the Bronze Star Medal with Valor.

While deployed to Southern Afghanistan, Sergeant Ray executed over 70 combat reconnaissance and direct-action missions involving 16 troops-in-contact situations. The missions resulted in 74 enemy killed, 26 enemy wounded, and six high value targets captured. While carrying out his tactical duties as a Special Forces team member, Sergeant Ray completed 176 forward weather observations.

- Staff Sgt, Marc Esposito, 21st Special Tactics Squadron, was awarded the Bronze Star Medal and a Purple Heart.

During Sergeant Esposito's deployment to Afghanistan during spring 2009, he conducted 12 combat reconnaissance patrols, fought Taliban forces during four troops-in-contact engagements, coordinating and synchronizing airpower in support of the team's maneuver. Throughout the engagement, he fired at enemy forces with an M-240B machine gun while simultaneously controlling aircraft in support of his team.

- Staff Sgt, Jonathan Jones, 10th Combat Weather Squadron, was awarded the Bronze Star Medal.

During Sergeant Jones' deployment to Afghanistan spring-fall 2009, he participated in 55 outside the wire combat operations and 41 troops-in-contact situations. Sergeant Jones took and disseminated 104 tactical weather observations and accomplished 10 environmental assessments of local terrain and rivers.

- Staff Sgt. Robert Laraia, 21st Special Tactics Squadron, was awarded the Bronze Star Medal and an Air Force Combat Action Medal.

During Sergeant Laraia's deployment to Afghanistan he conducted 15 combat reconnaissance patrols, key leadership engagements and humanitarian assistance missions in a remote and volatile region. During one convoy, his team came under direct and accurate rocket propelled grenade, heavy machine gun, and small-arms fire which impacted his vehicle. Sergeant Laraia immediately returned fire while simultaneously coordinating close-air support. Despite the grave danger from rounds impacting his vehicle, he continued to engage the enemy until close air support arrived and then controlled four GBU-38 bombs from a B-1 bomber causing the enemy to disengage and flee the area.

- Tech. Sgt. Eric Muller, 17th Air Support Operations Squadron, was awarded the Bronze Star Medal, first oak leaf cluster, and an Air Force Combat Action Medal. During Sergeant Muller's deployment to Afghanistan during the last half of 2007, he and his joint team came under direct small arms and mortar fire while manning a checkpoint. Sergeant Muller quickly radioed for close-air support and took a defensive position on the perimeter to return fire. After the 12-hour battle was over, sources reported 26 enemies killed including a Taliban commander with no friendly soldiers killed.

**ANNOUNCEMENT MESSAGE 2010 AIR FORCE SERGEANTS ASSOCIATION (AFSA)**

from the Combat Control Net blog, May 4, 2010

1. The Air Force Sergeants Association, sponsor of the Pitsenbarger Award, has selected Staff Sergeant Joseph A. Byrne, 21st Special Tactics Squadron, Pope AFB, North Carolina (AFSOC), as the winner of the 2010 AFSA Pitsenbarger Award.
2. The Pitsenbarger award annually recognizes an Air Force enlisted member who has performed a heroic act, on or off duty, which resulted in the saving of life or the prevention of serious injury. While deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, Sergeant Byrne executed multiple day and night rotary-wing infiltrations with his special forces team to capture high-value targets and disrupt a large drug and explosives nexus. His team was ambushed while operating in the objective area. Without regard for his life, Sergeant Byrne maintained an exposed position in order to identify, target and destroy the enemy with airpower. He called in one "danger close" air strike and several gun runs within 100 meters, preventing the element from being overrun.
3. SSgt Byrne is authorized the Air Force Recognition Ribbon in accordance with AFI 36-2805, Special Trophies and Awards.
4. The award will be presented to SSgt Byrne at the AFSA Honors Banquet, 18 August 2010, in Atlanta, Georgia

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WILLIAM D. FOOTE, Colonel, USAF  
Director, Personnel Services

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**COMBAT CONTROLLERS CONTRIBUTIONS HONORED IN CEREMONY** (*AMC News*) by Senior Airman Kirsten Wicker

**30 April 2010 - Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington** -- The Air Force chief of staff presented 13 medals to 11 combat controllers during a ceremony here April 29.

Gen. Norton Schwartz pinned three Silver Stars, five Bronze Stars with Valor, three Bronze Stars, and two Purple Hearts on Airmen from the 22nd Special Tactics Squadron for their actions during various deployments to Afghanistan. Two of the Silver Stars were presented to a single individual.

"It is truly a pleasure to be among these great Airmen," General Schwartz said. "Integrity, service, and excellence are embodied in every heroic action we celebrate here today."

The ceremony recognized these "exceptional Airmen," as the general called them, who "accomplished enormous feats without very much fanfare or pageantry" alongside Army, Navy and Marine Corps special operations forces.

"The families of these Airmen have forged them into men of uncommon valor," said Lt. Col. Bryan

Cannady, the 22nd STS commander. "It is my honor to serve beside them."

Combat controllers are highly-trained special operations forces and certified Federal Aviation Administration air traffic controllers who deploy undetected into combat and hostile environments to establish assault zones or airfields and then provide air traffic control and fire support.



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*Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz pins the Silver Star on Staff Sgt. Sean Harvell during a medal ceremony April 29, 2010, at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash. Two Silver Stars, the nation's third highest decoration for valor, were presented to Sergeant Harvell for his actions during multiple firefights with enemy forces in Afghanistan during spring and summer 2007. (U.S. Air Force photo/Abner Guzman)*

Two Silver Stars, the nation's third highest decoration for valor, were presented to Staff Sgt. Sean Harvell for his actions during multiple firefights with enemy forces in Afghanistan during spring and summer 2007.

In the first engagement, Sergeant Harvell and his coalition unit were completing a reconnaissance patrol through heavily contested Taliban territory. The team was ambushed and engaged the enemy in a firefight for nearly 23 hours. In order to coordinate close-air support, Sergeant Harvell deliberately exposed his position. Though surrounded by enemy fire, he continued to calmly direct air attacks, including a fighter strafing run within 45 feet of his own position.

Shortly thereafter, Sergeant Harvell's team was out on patrol when they saw an American helicopter go down. The team immediately began moving toward the crash site for recovery operations.

As the team was en route, they were attacked by an overwhelming Taliban force. Several rocket-propelled grenades impacted Sergeant Harvell's vehicle and he was wounded and knocked unconscious.

After coming to, he was able to engage the enemy with return fire and simultaneously direct deadly, danger-close air attacks on the insurgent force. Danger-close range is when friendly forces are within 600 meters of the target when calling for fire. His team's efforts allowed another special operations team to recover the remains of all service members and sensitive equipment from the crash site.

"I feel privileged that my generation is able to serve our country in war," Sergeant Harvell said. "Being a part of something bigger than yourself, depending on other guys and having them depend on you is an honor. Especially as a combat controller, people are depending on you (in order) to come home alive."



Almost two months later, Sergeant Harvell and his Army Special Forces team became engaged in a savage eight-hour firefight with Taliban forces. The firefight took place after the team spent three days in a rolling firefight with the enemy before tracking them to a compound.

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*Sergeant Harvell's second Silver Star was awarded for his actions when his Army Special Forces team became engaged in a savage eight-hour firefight with Taliban forces. (USAF Courtesy Photo)*

Sergeant Harvell and his team laid siege to the compound, and he repeatedly exposed his position in order to engage the enemy. As reinforcements arrived, the team withdrew from the compound with Sergeant Harvell providing cover fire for his teammates. Once out of the immediate danger area, he directed fighter aircraft and gunship engagement of the enemy with instant success. (***Ed.Note: See Sean Harvell's Helmand Vignette at the end of this article.***)

"It's an honor that so many people have come out to recognize us," Sergeant Harvell said. "I realize that General Schwartz is very busy, so for him to come out and personally recognize us is truly an honor. At the same time, I feel kind of guilty, because there are so many other guys out there doing the same thing every day."



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*Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz pins the Silver Star on Staff Sgt. Evan Jones during a medal ceremony April 29, 2010, at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash. Sergeant Jones received both a Silver Star and a Bronze Star with Valor for two separate incidents during a deployment to Afghanistan in 2008. (U.S. Air Force photo/Abner Guzman)*

Staff Sgt. Evan Jones was also honored during the ceremony. He received both a Silver Star and a Bronze Star with Valor for two separate incidents during a deployment to Afghanistan in 2008.

Sergeant Jones received the Silver Star for his actions during a firefight with the enemy when his coalition special-forces unit was ambushed during a combat reconnaissance mission.

The team was taking fire from two directions and Sergeant Jones returned fire while orchestrating close-air support. Continually exposing himself to enemy fire in order to coordinate the destruction of enemy fighting positions, Sergeant Jones was injured when a rocket-propelled grenade exploded near his vehicle. He continued to direct air support as his team moved through the engagement area, fighting through a gauntlet of 20 enemy combat positions.

"Honestly, I was just doing my job," Sergeant Jones said. "There are 300-plus combat controllers in the Air Force and all of us are just doing our jobs every day, and doing what we are trained to do."

After returning to the fire base, Sergeant Jones coordinated an urgent medical evacuation for a wounded soldier, and directed an air strike against enemy forces preparing to ambush another friendly patrol.

"It's hard to be flawless in a wartime situation, and it's hard for me not to look back and critique my actions," he said. "When I look back and think about the improvements I want to make, it just forces me to train harder and make sure I'm more prepared next time. We had a casualty during this engagement, and several guys were wounded. I think we honor those guys by just continuing to do the best job we can every day."



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*Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz and combat controllers from the 22nd Special Tactics Squadron take a moment to recognize retired Col. Joe Jackson at an medal ceremony honoring the Airmen April 29, 2010, at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash. General Schwartz visited the base to present 13 medals to 11 combat controllers. Colonel Jackson was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions in Vietnam on Mother's Day, 1968, when he risked his life to ensure no combat controllers were left behind; see CCT - The Eye of the Storm, page 115. (U.S. Air Force photo/Abner Guzman)*

In addition to Sergeants Harvell and Jones, nine other combat controllers received commendations.

The following were presented awards:

- Staff Sgt. Christopher Martin, of the 22nd STS, was awarded the Bronze Star Medal with Valor for his deployment to Afghanistan summer 2008. During his deployment, he directed 22 air attacks, five strafing runs and the release of 8,000 pounds of ordnances during two days of fighting.
- Senior Airman Mathew Matlock, of the 125th Special Tactics Squadron, was awarded the Bronze Star Medal for his deployment to Afghanistan fall 2008 through spring 2009. During his deployment, Airman Matlock conducted more than 35 mounted and dismounted combat patrols and 40 combat operations.

- Staff Sgt. Simon Malson, of the 22nd STS, was awarded the Bronze Star with Valor for his deployment to Afghanistan during summer through winter 2008. During his deployment, Sergeant Malson participated in 20 direct-fire engagements, 50 combat missions and controlled more than 100 aircraft flights resulting in more than 125 enemies killed in action.
- Staff Sgt. Jeffrey Reiss, of the 22nd STS, was awarded the Bronze Star Medal with Valor for his deployment to Afghanistan summer to winter 2008. During his deployment, Sergeant Reiss conducted more than 50 combat missions, and delivered air power in five direct-fire engagements, which led to 60 enemies killed.
- Master Sgt. Jeffrey Guilmain, of the 22nd STS, was awarded the Bronze Star Medal with Valor for his deployment to Afghanistan summer through fall 2006. During his deployment, Sergeant Guilmain was attached to an coalition forces unit where he conducted 20 mounted and dismounted patrols and controlled more than 50 aircraft to include the A-10 Thunderbolt II, B-1 Lancer and AC-130 Gunship.
- Tech. Sgt. Christopher Keeler, of the 22nd STS, was awarded the Bronze Star Medal for his deployment to Afghanistan summer to winter 2008. During his deployment, Sergeant Keeler was attached to four separate special-forces teams where he was the main joint terminal attack controller and was also a trainer to Afghanistan's 150 army special force commandos. While deployed, Sergeant Keeler conducted 15 combat missions that lead to 15 insurgents killed.
- Staff Sgt. Sean Mullins, of the 22nd STS, was awarded the Bronze Star Medal for his deployment to Afghanistan summer to winter 2008. During Sergeant Mullins deployment, he conducted more than 30 tactical missions, controlled more than 20 aircraft and facilitated the deployment of more than 5,000 pounds of ordnance that resulted in 50 enemies killed.
- Tech. Sgt. Marc Tirres, of the 22nd STS, was presented the Purple Heart for injuries he suffered while responding to a well coordinated insurgent attack on Afghanistan National Government facilities in January 2010. During this mission, he assaulted up three stories to engage a well armed and barricaded enemy. Because of his actions, the entrenched force was destroyed within hours compared to previous terrorist attacks which took days to stop. Upon further clearing of the building an explosive device detonated causing shrapnel wounds to left side of face, arm, and leg as well as his left eye.
- Tech. Sgt. Douglas Neville, of the 22nd STS, was presented the Purple Heart for injuries he suffered a large-scale mission to disrupt insurgent activity in the Helmand Province, Afghanistan, in January 2010. As enemy rounds grazed his position, Sergeant Neville returned fire, emptying six magazines. Enemy snipers hit Sergeant Neville twice. To escape the deadly fire, Sergeant Neville had no choice but to jump 20 feet off of the building, severely fracturing his foot upon landing.

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## **SEAN HARVELL'S HELMAND VIGNETTE**



In spring 2007, **Staff Sergeant Sean Harvell**, a Combat Controller, and his Special Forces team were the leading edge in the battle for control of the fiercely contested Helmand Province in Afghanistan. Months of intense fighting had taken a heavy toll on the team.

On July 25, 2007, the team was tasked to patrol several miles up the Helmand River valley, straight into a Taliban stronghold. The plan was to “move to contact,” a tactic designed to force the enemy to reveal their positions.

From the moment they rolled into the first village, Sergeant Harvell's team came under heavy fire. The teams fought ferociously, killing dozens of enemy fighters at close range. As darkness fell, an AC-130 gunship notified Sergeant Harvell that the enemy had an elaborate series of trenches and bunkers surrounding his position. As the battle intensified, Harvell directed the gunship to decimate the enemy trench lines. The enemy made frantic attempts to reinforce using motorcycles and trucks. Throughout the night, Sergeant Harvell and his teammates eliminated the insurgents with small arms fire and grenades.

Dangerously low on ammunition, the team decided to make its way out and wait for additional air support. During their movement, enemy fire erupted from every direction. Once they made it back to their vehicles, Sergeant Harvell manned his Humvee's heavy weapon to suppress the insurgents. At the same time, he coordinated air support. Minutes later, A-10s and an AC-130 gunship arrived and Sergeant Harvell directed precise, devastating attacks on the enemy positions.