

## **AIR COMMANDOS RECEIVE MEDALS FOR VITAL ROLE IN COMBAT**

**OPERATIONS** by Tech. Sgt. Marelise Wood, 352nd Special Operations Group Public Affairs

**August 4, 2010 - RAF MILDENHALL, England** -- Three members of the 321st Special Tactics Squadron were presented with medals at a Purple Heart and Bronze Star ceremony on July 29.



Tech. Sgt. Benjamin Hannigan and Staff Sgts. David Ibsen and Jeffrey Diccio, all combat controllers, were honored at the ceremony for duties performed during combat operations. Sergeant Ibsen received a Purple Heart for his wounds received in action, and Sergeants Hannigan and Diccio were awarded the Bronze Star Medal.

"Unlike most Airmen, our combat controllers, pararescuemen, and special operations weathermen typically operate 'outside the wire' in places like Iraq and Afghanistan," said Col. Gary McCollum, 352nd Special Operations Group commander. "Our Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTAC), in particular, normally link up with sister service or partner nation teams, representing our United States and her Air Force in the front lines of battle, coordinating and controlling the full range of airpower our joint team brings to the fight. It is often this vital link from team to JTAC to airpower that makes or breaks a combat situation."

Sergeant Ibsen was on his first deployment since being assigned to the 352nd Special Operations Group. He was deployed to Southwest Asia providing JTAC support to a sister-service unit.

According to Sergeant Ibsen, he and his team sergeant had returned to their quarters following the cancellation of a mission. Around five in the morning, they began hearing what sounded like gunfire. Dressed in his physical fitness training uniform, he grabbed his body armor, battlefield kit, and his weapon and did what came naturally--he headed towards the sound of battle.

As they got closer, "we started hearing some explosions going off that sounded like rocket-propelled grenades, so we quickly assessed the fire's point of origin and headed in that direction," said Sergeant Ibsen. "We approached a gate close to the base interior perimeter road, just inside of the outer wall. This was where the insurgents were trying to breach the base."

Three insurgents had breached the outer wall and most of the military members guarding the inner gate were injured, he said. There was one member left trying to fend off the attack, so Sergeant Ibsen and his team sergeant quickly provided support and successfully cleared the immediate area.

They were subsequently joined by three other members of their team and seven other military

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members and proceeded to clear the rest of the base perimeter, where they were told five more insurgents were lying in wait.

"The 12 of us traversed the perimeter and began clearing the rest of the space around the base," said Sergeant Ibsen. "We had only gone about one or two kilometers when the soldier behind me stepped on a land mine and lost his foot. I was knocked down by the blast, my back was hit with shrapnel, the backs of my arms were peppered with shrapnel, and a couple of shards hit the back of my head."

With blood running down the back of his head and a nearby teammate severely injured, Sergeant Ibsen calmly used his radio to call for emergency ground medical support, helping save his wounded wingman's life.

"While Sergeant Ibsen's decoration for this engagement is pending, today we present him the purple heart for his wounds received in action," said Colonel McCollum.

For Sergeant Diccico, the part of his deployment that stands out most in his mind was when his convoy drove right into an ambush.

"We were out on a combat reconnaissance patrol, which is executed to confirm or deny enemy presence," he said. "Upon driving into the village, the lead vehicle in our convoy came under rocket-propelled grenade fire."

According to the sergeant, the attackers then proceeded to fire machine guns from both sides, from an elevated firing position. Sergeant Diccico began firing back, successfully thwarting further enemy advances. He requested close air support, which responded within minutes.

"Within approximately five to ten minutes, there were friendly air assets overhead," said Sergeant Diccico. The sergeant switched from controlling his hand-held weapon to maneuvering his airborne weapon.

"Over the course of the attack, I was responsible for dropping three 500-lb bombs and one 2,000-lb bomb on enemy firing positions." By the end of the attack, there were 30 confirmed enemy killed in action.

Sergeant Hannigan, meanwhile, described his deployment experience as "pretty uneventful" and marveled at the fact that he was receiving a Bronze Star Medal. He recounted one such "uneventful" experience which involved fending off Afghan insurgents during a day-long battle. His team was tasked with providing support to an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) infantry unit in the form of a quick reaction force.

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"Simply put, we were there to provide firepower if they needed it," said Sergeant Hannigan. "It was a large operation, about 600 infantry with seven of their own JTACs. They were executing several different missions throughout the area."

According to the sergeant, his team was notified that about 10 insurgents were positioning themselves to attack. His team's objective was to intercept them.

"As we moved into a blocking position, the shooting began," he said. "The gunfire continued for what seemed like forever, but it was probably less than 10 minutes."

The insurgents, he was told, were retreating toward a school house for cover. Although the team had close air support, ordnance couldn't be dropped at that time because of the risk of civilian casualties. In order to deter the enemy and in hopes of clearing them from the area, Sergeant Hannigan called in a show of force. "A show of force is when the aircraft approaches very low, fast and loud--as if it's going to drop a bomb," he explained.

Once the insurgents changed location, the ISAF infantry members then headed to the area surrounding the school to clear it. They were engaged with gunfire a second time until one of the ISAF JTACs was able to maneuver, observe, and monitor. Once the area was subsequently cleared, the ISAF infantry members headed back to where Sergeant Hannigan and his team were located.

"Once the unit arrived at our location, the ISAF JTAC immediately wanted to put bombs on target." However, with so many friendly forces on the ground, the pilot wanted to be absolutely sure that the area was clear.

"The pilot wanted to make sure that friendly forces were clear and that the correct rules of engagement were followed. The rules of engagement are precise on munitions dropped near friendly positions," he said.

This was where Sergeant Hannigan's assistance proved vital. He interjected on the radio, reassuring the pilot that the ground forces needed air support, and that he knew exactly where friendly forces were in relation to enemy fighting positions.

"I am with the closest friendly forces,' I said, 'I can see the last enemy firing position, and they pose an imminent threat to us if ordnance isn't dropped off this aircraft!'"

With this confirmation of imminent threat to friendly forces, the pilot was then able to legally engage the enemy.

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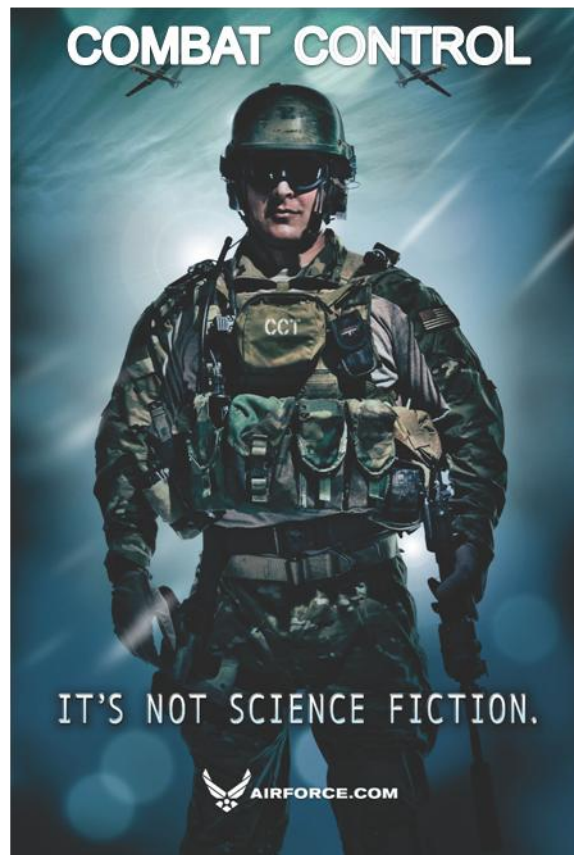
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"When we returned to our forward operating base, we were informed that at least eight enemy were killed in action," said Sergeant Hannigan.

Captain Travis Deutman, 321st STS team leader for Sergeants Ibsen, Hannigan and Diccico, is very proud of them and stresses that these instances were but a part of the overall accomplishments that earned each of them their medals.

Whether taken by surprise or prepared for an attack, these Airmen were ready to face the enemy and would do it again.

"What keeps me going is knowing that I'm contributing to keeping the bad guys at bay, away from my friends and family, and that's all that matters," said Sergeant Hannigan.



Air Force Recruiting Poster

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