

## COMBAT CONTROLLER ROBERT GUTIERREZ TO RECEIVE THE AIR FORCE CROSS by Robert F. Dorr

**September 7, 2011 - Headquarters, U.S. Air Force, Washington, DC** -In a raging firefight in Afghanistan's Herat province on Oct. 5, 2009, Air Force Special Tactics Combat Controller Staff Sgt. Robert Gutierrez, Jr. took a wound and lost nearly half the blood in his body while bullets and rocket propelled grenades swirled around him. After a medic jammed a syringe into his collapsed lung, Gutierrez continued fighting. He is credited with saving the lives of a dozen U.S. soldiers in his Special Forces unit. The Special Forces troops were out to get the No. 2 Taliban



commander in the region, but were pinned down and outgunned until Gutierrez set an example by refusing to die or to give up.

*Staff Sgt. Robert Gutierrez, pictured here during an earlier action, is to receive the Air Force Cross. U.S. Air Force photo*

“I don't know of another example of such extraordinary courage and persistence,” said retired Air Force Col. Bob Lind, a historian who studies awards and decorations. Told that

Gutierrez was scheduled to receive the Air Force Cross on September 21, Lind said, “Some officials believe this young man should be awarded the Medal of Honor.”

As the war in Afghanistan enters its eleventh year - on October 7 - Gutierrez will be only the fourth airman to receive the nation's second highest award for valor during a combat action in that country. No one in the Air Force has been awarded the Medal of Honor since Vietnam.

### Courageous Controller

Probably, no form of recognition is adequate for self-effacing, nine-year veteran Gutierrez. His longest day began when his team was sent into an Afghan village, circumventing roads strewn with improvised explosive devices. Gutierrez was in contact with a flight of F-16 Fighting Falcons in the area. He instructed them to loiter at a distance so the sound of their engines wouldn't tip off the Taliban.

Once in the village, the assault force stormed a building and came under heavy fire. Gutierrez and a soldier killed a machinegun-toting insurgent while a reconnaissance aircraft overhead provided real-time information on other Taliban fighters, including a group approaching the

building from the east. Gutierrez was communicating with the ISR craft when the rifle of a soldier beside him jammed. Gutierrez pushed the soldier out of the way and returned fire. He ducked into the building to get a better look at the insurgents. He popped out and traded fire with another insurgent on a rooftop. Gutierrez killed the insurgent but sustained a sucking chest wound that knocked him down, severely constricted his breathing, and built up pressure in his chest.

## **War Wound**

Gutierrez later told Scott Fontaine of the trade journal *Air Force Times* that he knew exactly what was happening to him. When he tried to talk, blood gushed from his mouth and nose. “Gutierrez had seen an injury like this before,” Fontaine wrote. “He figured he had about three minutes before he bled out.”

That was when a quick-thinking medic took the painful and extreme measure that enabled Gutierrez to continue breathing – and fighting.

After the medic worked on him, amid the ongoing battle with its explosions, gunfire and RPG rounds, Gutierrez juggled the ISR aircraft, the F-16s, and a newly arrived flight of A-10 Thunderbolt IIs, or Warthogs. He directed the F-16s to fly overhead and dispense flares to intimidate the Taliban fighters.

Gutierrez directed the A-10 flight to swoop in and attack the Taliban with their nose-mounted, GAU-8 30-mm cannon. This was a situation with zero tolerance for error. Gutierrez was instructing the “Hogs” to lay explosive shells the size of milk bottles into Taliban positions just 20 meters from the American troops.

The A-10s made two strafing runs. It was deafening. The impact was shattering. American officials would later learn that they’d achieved their goal, taking down the regional Taliban commander. Gutierrez, despite his grave wound, told the ground force commander that the best decision, now, would be to split the team to evacuate the wounded and use a third Warthog strafing run to provide cover.

Gutierrez’s part of the team had to make its way to a landing zone fully a mile from the firefight. Assisted by others and wavering in and out of consciousness, Gutierrez guided helicopters to the LZ. It took an hour for the rotorcraft to arrive. Gutierrez gave the aviators a situation report, made sure the other part of his team was still receiving air support, and finally slipped into unconsciousness, having lost half of the blood in his body.

The bullet that struck the tactical air controller broke two ribs, shattered a lung, and inflicted other damage. During his stay in hospitals following the battle, Gutierrez suffered infections on four occasions. Two years after his extraordinary heroic action – in which not a single American was killed – Gutierrez is now almost completely recovered and plans to remain in the Air Force.

## Higher Honor?

Gutierrez, a native of Chula Vista, Calif., is one of five service members – all of whom enlisted after 9/11 – chosen to accompany Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta on Sept. 6 to ceremonies at the Pentagon, Shanksville, Penn., and ground zero in Manhattan where hijackers crashed airliners in the attacks on Sept. 11, 2011. According to a Pentagon spokesman, Panetta's visit to the attack sites is meant as a remembrance of those who perished in the attacks and to emphasize the concept of service to the nation.

Gutierrez told reporters the visit to ground zero “reminded me why I enlisted.” Gutierrez said he tried to enlist the day after the attacks, but the recruiting stations were closed. When they reopened, a waiting list quickly formed because of the rush of people wanting to sign up for the military, he said. His own enlistment was final about six months after the attacks.

His fateful battle in Herat province was not Gutierrez's first, nor was it the first time he has been decorated for valor. In January 2008, he was in a convoy that came under fire along a mountain road in Afghanistan. Gutierrez called in F-16s and A-10s.

When his team leader was incapacitated and another team member was wounded and stranded in the enemy kill zone, Gutierrez engaged and killed four insurgents with his M4 carbine. He orchestrated strafing runs, adding AH-64 Apache battlefield helicopters to the mix. Said the Air Force: “During the engagement, Sergeant Gutierrez synchronized air strikes, utilized UAVs [unmanned aerial vehicles] and his team's organic firepower to effectively incapacitate more than 240 insurgent enemy fighters including a ‘high-value target,’ the objective of the entire mission.” The exact date, location and names of other participants have not been released.

For this action, Gutierrez received the Bronze Star with “V” device, signifying valor.

After news of the pending Air Force Cross award appeared in *Air Force Times* and elsewhere, officials sought to keep a lid on it in order to announce the award at the Air Force Association convention scheduled for mid-month. Air Force Officials contacted for this article wouldn't comment on any aspect of the Gutierrez story, but that didn't prevent observers from suggesting that Gutierrez should receive the Medal of Honor instead. No airman has yet received the nation's top award for valor for action in Afghanistan, but Gutierrez's combat action is similar to two actions by enlisted airmen in Southeast Asia in the 1960s that earned the top award.

“This is one of several actions involving members in different service branches where the Medal of Honor is the only thing that fits the situation,” said Doug Sterner, a historian and leading expert on military medals. “The Pentagon has made the awards process too cumbersome and commanders are sometimes deterred from recommending the medal because of the paperwork and the required investigation.” Sterner said Gutierrez's action is an exact fit for the language that appears in a citation when the medal is awarded – “conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty.”