

CSAF PRESENTS AIR FORCE CROSS, SILVER STAR IN HURLBURT CEREMONY

by Rachel Arroyo, Air Force Special Operations Command Public Affairs

October 28, 2011 - Hurlburt Field, Florida -- Two Air Force Special Operations Command combat controllers were presented military decorations here Oct. 27 by the Air Force Chief of Staff for exhibiting extraordinary heroism in combat.

Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz presents the Air Force Cross to Staff Sgt. Robert Gutierrez, Special Tactics and Training Squadron combat controller, during a ceremony at Hurlburt Field, Fla., Oct. 27, 2011. Gutierrez was awarded the Air Force Cross, the second highest military decoration, for displaying extraordinary heroism in combat while deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. (U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. Sharida Jackson)



Staff Sgt. Robert Gutierrez Jr. was presented the Air Force Cross and Tech. Sgt. Ismael Villegas was presented the Silver Star by Gen. Norton Schwartz in a joint ceremony. The Air Force Cross is the service's highest award and is second only to the Medal of Honor. The Silver Star is awarded for valor, to include risk of life during engagement with the enemy.



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Both Airmen received their awards for gallant actions during combat operations in 2009 that directly contributed to saving the lives of their teammates and decimating enemy forces. Gutierrez and Villegas were both assigned to the 21st Special Tactics Squadron, Pope Field, N.C., when they deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2009, although the two medals are not related to the same operation.

The Freedom Hangar was a sea of berets as more than 1,000 gathered to watch Schwartz present the Airmen their awards. The general credited the two combat controllers for not only being courageous, but for also being humble in recognition.

"With the modesty that is characteristic of the quiet professional, these two Joint Terminal Attack Controllers would hardly hesitate to claim that, during the incidents for which they are being decorated today, they were merely performing as they were trained," Schwartz said. "And they are accepting the honors on behalf of the entire team that worked with them."



Gutierrez and Villegas attribute their exceptional performance on the battlefield to training they received at AFSOC.

Air Force Special Operations Command combat controller Staff Sgt. Robert Gutierrez, shown here in Afghanistan. (U.S. Air Force Courtesy photo)

"You don't have a lot of time to think about yourself," Villegas said. "Your training allows you to do your job so you can overcome any obstacle and ultimately bring brothers on the battlefield home safely."

Gutierrez, now an instructor at the Special Tactics Training Squadron located here, is the second living recipient of the Air Force Cross since Sept. 11. Like Gutierrez, the last five recipients of the medal have all been AFSOC Airmen. Gutierrez accepted the Air Force Cross on behalf of all of his fellow Airmen in combat.

"It is for every Airman who is fighting," he said. "This is a

representation of them and their sacrifice. I just get the honor of wearing (the medal) for them."

"I may have received this, but this isn't for me." Gutierrez told reporters. "It's for every airman that's fighting, every sacrifice we've given, every one of my fallen teammates – this is them, this is the representation of them. I just get to wear it for them."

Gutierrez received the Air Force Cross for actions during a four-hour battle in Herat Province, Afghanistan, in October 2009. The team was ambushed during a high-risk night raid to capture the number two Taliban leader in the region. The team leader was shot in the leg, and the remaining ten-man team was trapped in a building with no escape route. Assigned as the Joint Terminal Attack Controller to an Army Special Forces detachment, Gutierrez's job was to call in air support for his teammates.

During the firefight, he was shot in the chest and suffered a collapsed lung. Still, Gutierrez continued to return fire while calling in precision strafing runs from an A-10 Thunderbolt II nearby. Though bleeding out and struggling to inhale enough oxygen to breathe, let alone speak into his radio, death was not on his mind, he said.

"Your time is in front of you. You're not thinking of that," he said. "I was thinking, I am going to do everything I can to get the mission done before I bleed out."



Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz presented the Air Force Cross—the service's second highest award for valor in combat—to SSgt. Robert Gutierrez for his heroic actions in Afghanistan in October 2009, during a ceremony at Hurlburt Field, Fla., Oct. 27, 2011. Gutierrez suffered a bullet wound, two collapsed lungs, and a busted ear drum, but still managed to successfully call in multiple "danger close" air strikes against a determined insurgent force. Here, Gutierrez (left) poses with Army Sgt. 1st Class Mike Jones, 7th Special Forces Group medic, who saved Gutierrez's life twice during that 2009 mission. (Courtesy photo by Devon Ravine)

Following the first strafing run, the team medic re-inflated Gutierrez's lung with a needle decompression, which allowed him to direct two more strafing runs within 30 feet of enemy forces, decimating the enemy and allowing the team to escape.

For Villegas, learning he would receive the Silver Star came as a surprise to the Del Rio, Texas native.

"I didn't expect this. I was told I was nominated, and it was an honor. But to receive it ... it's the biggest honor I can have," he said. "This is for my guys. They put their lives on the line each day. I'm taking this on behalf of all of those guys out there."

In September 2009, Villegas was clearing a road of improvised explosive devices near Bagh Khosak, Afghanistan, when his team was ambushed. Villegas ran 200 feet across an open minefield to achieve a better position from which he could return fire with his personal weapon while calling in air support. As the only JTAC assigned to an Army Special Forces team, Villegas directed precision firepower from artillery, as well as fixed- and rotary-wing assets, to kill 32 enemy insurgents during the 16-hour firefight and save the lives of his teammates.

While there were many heroes in the crowd wearing the Air Force uniform, Schwartz also pointed out the unsung family members who sacrifice for their Airman so they may serve their country.

"Your quiet, understated sacrifice gives deep personal meaning to your loved ones' service," Schwartz said to the families of Gutierrez and Villegas. "You have my personal thanks and the appreciation of a grateful nation, and certainly the appreciation of the U.S. Air Force." Demetria Saucedo, Villegas' mother, said it is days like these that make the sacrifice worthwhile. "It was a lot of sleepless nights while he was gone, but today is a good day," Saucedo said. "I am so proud of my son."



Gutierrez and Villegas surrounded by fellow Combat Controllers following the awards ceremony. Those with beards are slated to deploy to Afghanistan in the near future. (U.S. Air Force courtesy photo)