



## San Antonio 'PJ' dies in Afghan crash

By Sig Christenson - Express-News

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Tech. Sgt. Michael P. Flores, a 1997 John Marshall High School graduate, was one of four killed after a copter went down during rescue mission. COURTESY PHOTO

Tech. Sgt. Michael P. Flores was an elite Air Force "PJ" on a mercy flight when his helicopter went down Wednesday in one of Afghanistan's most violent provinces, but it wasn't just any mission.

That was the day the father of two marked his fifth wedding anniversary.

"I'm sad that it happened to him, but if it wasn't his helicopter, it would have been someone else's helicopter and someone else's family and that is something you wouldn't wish upon someone," said his sister, Anna Flores of San Antonio. "That's the way I feel. I don't know how he would feel."

A 1997 Marshall High School graduate, Flores, 31, of San Antonio was killed along with three others after their Air Force HH-60 Pavehawk helicopter went down in Helmand province. He was posthumously promoted Thursday from staff sergeant.

Among the other victims was a fellow pararescuer from the same Arizona-based squadron as Flores, Senior Airman Benjamin D. White, 24, of Erwin, Tenn.

First Lt. Joel C. Gentz, 25, of Grass Lake, Mich., and Staff Sgt. David C. Smith, 26, of Eight Mile, Ala., also were killed.

Gentz was a combat rescue officer with the 58th Rescue Squadron at Nellis AFB, Nev., and Smith was a flight engineer with the 66th Rescue Squadron at Nellis.

Other people on the casualty evacuation mission were hurt, but officials wouldn't say how many.

"They were getting multiple missions a day, so this was just one of many," said Flores' boss, Chief Master Sgt. Chaz Stiefken.

Insurgents claimed to have shot down the Osprey. The International Security Assistance Force headquarters in Kabul initially said it was hit by hostile fire, but a spokeswoman there told the San Antonio Express-News that report couldn't be confirmed.

"We have a team out to investigate it, so I can't confirm that is the reason the helicopter went down," Air Force Master Sgt. Sabrina Foster said.

The crash ended a stellar career that began after Flores graduated from high school, where he was on the swim team.

At one time, pararescuers were known as "parajumpers." The name changed, but the "PJ" initials stuck.

When he started two years of rigorous PJ training at Lackland AFB, Flores' time as a competitive swimmer may have given him an edge.

On his first day, Flores had to swim 75 feet underwater, run 1 1/2 miles in less than 10 minutes and 30 seconds, and perform 50 sit-ups in 2 minutes and 50 pushups in 2 minutes.

Many wash out of PJ training during the water test.

The standards only became tougher. In 1999, pararescue graduates had to run 6 miles in 45 minutes, swim 2 1/2 miles in 80 minutes and swim 75-foot laps underwater — six times.

As a "7-level" leader with the 48th Rescue Squadron at Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., he met exceptionally rigorous rules because he ran the standards and evaluation department.

Lean and athletic at 5 feet 11 inches, he ran three miles in less than 23 minutes, exceeding physical training standards that other PJs had to meet.

"When you're a 7-level, you're at the peak of your qualifications. You're qualified to be in charge of any mission out there and Sgt. Flores was an exceptional team leader," said Stiefken, who oversees all issues for enlistees in the squadron, which includes about 40 pararescuers.

“He led his men into literally hundreds of combat missions, saving hundreds of lives,” added Stiefken, 42, of Anchorage, Alaska. “He was in charge of all operations once on the ground and he always brought his men home alive and accomplished the mission, whether to recover the remains (of dead troops) or save the lives of the patients, since we've been in Afghanistan.”

It was his second tour of Afghanistan in less than a year.

Life as a PJ is a bit of the Army, Air Force and James Bond. Pararescuers hold many of the same skills as those in special operations. They know hand-to-hand combat, jump from airplanes at 20,000 feet at night, swim to shore in scuba gear and rappel from helicopters.

As important is the fact that they're skilled emergency medical technicians, trained to save people trapped in crashed aircraft — even if the plane or copter is on a mountain.

“Our real cream of the crop and bread and butter, and the reason these guys are put in harm's way, is because of their medical qualifications. They're advanced combat trauma medics,” said Stiefken, the son of an Air Force PJ.

“He knew the dangers and the consequences, but he loved it,” his 29-year-old sister said. “What the PJs stand for is that others may live. I think he enjoyed the special training they got and they were able to use it for good, to save lives.”

*Staff Writer Scott Huddleston contributed to this report.*

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