

Excerpted from the Pacific Stars and Stripes

Kadena honors fallen comrades

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KADENA AIR BASE — As a final tribute to Air Force Master Sgt. William McDaniel and Staff Sgt. Juan Ridout, 60 elite special operations troops removed their berets at a memorial service Wednesday to honor their fallen comrades.

During a procession conducted to "Amazing Grace" on bagpipes, two airmen at a time approached a table displaying photos of McDaniel and Ridout.

They took off their berets, stripped them of their coveted badges, laid them among other memorabilia, replaced their berets, saluted and marched off.

"We were giving to them something that's very sacred to us," Staff Sgt. John Romspert said of the ritual.

Tech. Sgt. Ronald O'Steen said that by giving their badges the airmen identified with McDaniel and Ridout, who gave their lives in service to their country.

"To give ... that up, shows the love that we have for our fallen comrades," O'Steen said. "When you see us wearing the beret without the flash, it signifies that we are without those two right now."

The two airmen and eight soldiers from Echo Company, 160th Special Operations Regiment in Taegu, South Korea, died Feb. 22 in a helicopter crash in the Philippines. The cause of the accident is under investigation.

Their mission that morning was to fly as pararescuemen and provide rescue assistance if needed, said their unit commander, Maj. Jeffrey Staha.

Pararescuemen are trained to drop out of helicopters and other aircraft to rescue people at sea or behind enemy lines.

"This mission was in direct support of Operation Enduring Freedom, assisting the people of the Philippines in their efforts to rid their country of the same terrorist network that attacked our country on September 11," Staha told nearly 1,000 people who attended Wednesday's memorial service.

The service was held in an aircraft maintenance hangar near Kadena's flight line across from the 353rd Special Operations Group headquarters. McDaniel and Ridout were assigned to the 353rd's Special Tactics Squadron.

When the MH-47E Chinook helicopter on which McDaniel and Ridout were flying crashed into the sea about 8 miles south of Negros is land, the crew of another Chinook flying in tandem began immediate search-and-rescue operations, Staha said.

Two other pararescuemen from the 320th on the other aircraft "were lowered into the water to rescue their friends, but to no avail," Staha said. "These men aboard both aircraft were valiant in their mission, and they knew that each would be there for the other."

Speaking of McDaniel, Staha noted that he was the epitome of the "quiet professional" who never sought recognition, yet who was named the 320th's pararescueman of the year for 2001.

The four pillars of McDaniel's life, Staha pointed out, were evident to everyone who knew him. His devotion and love for God first, his wife, Debbie, second, his 2-year-old son, Alexander, third, and his job fourth were the priorities of his life, Staha noted.

Pastor Michael Peslak told how McDaniel was a hard worker who was prepared to meet all the obligations of this life and the next.

"Even for death, he was prepared," Peslak said recounting how McDaniel became a Christian seven years ago while stationed in Aviano, Italy.

Speaking of Ridout, friend and fellow pararescueman Tech. Sgt. Mark Hoffer noted that he was "the walking, talking PJ (pararescue-jumper)."

Ridout was part of a rescue of an F-16 pilot who was shot down in Kosovo during Operation Allied Force. He was the 320th's pararescueman of the year in 1999.

Ridout's co-workers fondly remembered him as the unit's jokester, one who relished his job and had a love for life and for his girlfriend, Stacey Fejer.

When news reached the squadron that McDaniel and Ridout had died in the crash, Romspert recounted how his heart dropped "clear into [his] stomach."

When squadron personnel flew to the Philippines on Tuesday to participate in a memorial service there, O'Steen said it "hit home" how incredible the men in his unit are.

"I saw my brothers down there grieving and then stepping right into the mission again. That to me was the proudest moment," he said.

Staha noted that he has sent two replacements to the Philippines.

"The mission has to go on," he said. "That's the nature of our business. This is a risky business we're in. It's an important mission. We know all the risks, and we've all taken those risks and have accepted those risks.

"When we [lost] these two, we knew they were doing exactly what they wanted to be doing, taking the risks that they've taken again and again."