

D-M remembers fallen pararescuemen

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DAVIS-MONTHAN AIR FORCE BASE, Ariz. -- Gathered outside of the 48th Rescue Squadron, members of D-M quietly sit in a somber state. Some wait in rows of chairs under cover of a canopy, shielding them from the hot Tucson heat. Other Airmen sit on bleachers, while some decide to stand. The Patriot Guard Riders are there in full support, each member standing next to one another behind the chairs, each one proudly displaying the American flag. The mood is overwhelmingly melancholy as everyone waits for the ceremony to start.

The ceremony was to honor two fallen D-M Airmen, Tech. Sgt. Michael Flores and Senior Airman Benjamin White, both pararescuemen with the 48th Rescue Squadron, who paid the ultimate sacrifice during their deployment in Afghanistan June 9, 2010.

Along with Sergeant Flores and Airman White, Capt. David Wisniewski, 1st Lt. Joel Gentz and Staff Sgt. David Smith were killed and Capt. Anthony Simone and Master Sgt. Christopher Aquilera were injured.

On their third alert of the day, Air Force Combat Search and Rescue aircrafts, call signs Pedro 66 and Pedro 67, departed from Bastion Afghanistan Air Force in southern Afghanistan. Their mission, like many missions before, was to extract someone from battle. This time, the injured was a British Marine. Upon arriving on scene, Pedro 66 and 67 immediately began to take enemy fire which resulted in Pedro 66 receiving damage to the tail rotor. With the damaged tail

rotor, Pedro 66 attempted to fly away from attacking enemy forces to ensure no more Marines would be injured. After clearing the landing zone and surrounding civilian houses, Pedro 66 became uncontrollable and crashed.

Sergeant Flores and Airman White's families, loved ones and friends came out to the ceremony as well as members of the 48th RQS and other D-M Airmen, to pay their respects and honor their fallen friends and brethren.

The presenting of the colors started the ceremony, followed by a moving performance of the national anthem performed by Staff Sgt. Stephen Skiano, a pararescuemen with the 48th RQS, followed by an invocation by Chaplain Contrell.

"Today we will pay tribute to two pararescuemen, warriors and fellow Airmen, who made the ultimate sacrifice and commitment to their country, and the defense of our nation, so others may live," said Capt. Stephen Colletti, the ceremony's master of ceremonies and member of the 48th RQS.

On June 9, 2010, Col. John Cherrey, 355th Fighter Wing commander, was the commander for the 451st Expeditionary Operations Group in Kandahar Air Field, Afghanistan, Captain Colletti said. On that tragic day, he was the deployed group commander for Sergeant Flores and Airman White.

Colonel Cherrey proceeded to take the podium. *"I'll never forget the call I received about Pedro 66," Colonel Cherrey said. "I sat in shock for quite some time trying to understand the circumstances, why that mission, with all the other dangerous missions they've flown and about the friends and families it would affect. I didn't have answers to those questions, but I did know they were doing what every ground commander out there needed of them. They were bravely going to an area they knew was dangerous and they did it like they did so many other missions that we ask of them, so that others may live."*

Captain Colletti then announced the renaming of two streets on D-M in honor of Sergeant Flores and Airman White.

"Both streets reside at the east and west end of the base's rescue complex area and the new street signs are now up and in place," Captain Colletti said. "These 48th RQS pararescuemen are now permanently etched into our history and fabric that make up this outstanding base."

Three pararescuemen who served with Sergeant Flores and Airman White, stood one behind the other, each holding ceremonial street signs with the names of the fallen Airmen. Each one took their turn presenting the street sign and saying a few kind words to the grieving families.

Speaking next was Lt. Col. Jason D. Pifer, 48th Rescue Squadron commander. *"Today's date reminds us of the piercing pain we all receive with this tragic event," Colonel Pifer said. "But it's also a date we need to use to remind ourselves of the heroes who are no longer with us in person, but permanently live in our hearts. While today reminds us of an extremely challenging and painful time in our lives, I hope that this gesture of this memorial can help us try and feel a sense of pride in knowing that Flo and Ben were doing what they loved, what they were trained to do and will now be proudly displayed for all to see. In closing, it is with deep sorrow that we are now bonded with this tragic event. But it is with great pride that we have an opportunity and responsibility to immortalize Flo and Ben in this permanent and befitting manner."*

The 48th RQS then unveiled the memorial pedestal and plaque.

"The memorial will always remind us of our fallen warriors and the unwavering dedication each rescue professional has in executing their assigned duties," Captain Colletti said.

Col. Billy D. Thompson, commander of the 563rd Rescue Group, delivered the closing remarks.

"Almost one year ago today, we were gathered here at D-M for a much different ceremony in honor of Flo and Ben and the pain of losing them was much more recent in our memories," Colonel Thompson said. *"Today we gather here to fulfill a promise most of us in the rescue community made that day, the promise that we would never forget Flo and Ben and that their legacy would live with us forever. Today, as each of you have the opportunity to view the dedicated pedestal and as you leave here today via Mike Flores street or Ben White street, be very thankful that we have men like Sergeant Flores and Airman White and that we have families like the Flores family and the White family that raised selfless men that loved not only their families, but their country and their fellow man. Be thankful that they had wives, girlfriends and friends that shared them with all of us."*

With the ceremony over, the two families of the fallen Airmen were escorted up to the memorial pedestal and plaque by members of the 48th RQS. The grieving families were visibly moved by the inscription and the photos carved into the plaque.