

# SURVIVAL

## on Takur Gar

**Keary Miller became the third airman, but the first survivor, to be awarded an Air Force Cross for heroism in 2002's Operation Anaconda.**

**O**n March 4, 2002, Air Force TSgt. Keary J. Miller crashed onto mount Takur Gar in Afghanistan with his quick reaction force (QRF) teammates. Their mission had been to rescue two special operators on the ground, trying to evade enemy capture, but it quickly turned into a simple mission of survival.

Over the next 17 hours, Miller provided critical medical care to 10 wounded US service members and helped recover the bodies of seven others killed in action, all while under heavy fire from Taliban and al Qaeda militants. In 2003, he was awarded a Silver Star for his actions that day in what is now variously known as Operation Anaconda's Battle of Roberts Ridge or Battle of Takur Gar.

This January, after a Department of Defense-wide review of medals awarded in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, Miller's Silver Star was upgraded to the Air Force Cross. The medal is the highest service-specific award for valor, and Miller—now a retired master sergeant—is only the ninth airman to receive it since 9/11.

In 2002, the Shah-e-Kot valley in Afghanistan was a



By Wilson Brissett, Senior Editor

stronghold for al Qaeda and Taliban fighters, and early that year, US forces launched Operation Anaconda to dislodge the enemy presence. Planners had identified mount Takur Gar—at nearly 12,000 feet—as key high ground.

On March 4, the US attempted to seize control of the peak from enemy forces, but the mission, undertaken by special operations forces, went terribly wrong. At about 3 a.m., an Army MH-47E “tried to insert a special operations team on top of an enemy stronghold,”

reads an Air Force description of the battle. While landing, it was hit by rocket-propelled grenades and gunfire, so it lifted off rapidly to get away, causing Petty Officer 1st Class Neil C. Roberts, a Navy SEAL, to fall from the helicopter. With the MH-47E heavily damaged, the aircrew made an emergency landing about three miles away. (See “To the Top of Takur Gar,” July 2011.)

Miller and his team approached the same mountain and the same enemy positions in another Chinook. As they



Then-TSgt. Keary Miller in an undisclosed location. He was part of a quick reaction force trying to rescue two US military personnel stranded on Takur Gar.



In 2009, Miller, then a master sergeant, shows his son, Ian, the special operations display at the National Museum of the US Air Force.

drew near, militants on the mountain-top fired rocket-propelled grenades at the MH-47 and it too went down. The al Qaeda and Taliban forces continued to hold the peak above the crash site and rained fire down on the crashed Chinook with mortars and more RPGs.

The other members of Miller's team were combat controller SSgt. Gabriel P. Brown, pararescueman SrA. Jason D. Cunningham, and 10 Army Rangers. As a pararescueman (PJ), Miller's primary duty was to tend to wounded service members in combat.

As the team leader, Miller was also

responsible for the younger members of the group; Cunningham was on his first deployment.

The team's initial goal was to fight its way out of the wrecked chopper, a “virtual bullet sponge,” Brown recalled recently. The Rangers fired up the mountain at the enemy position, a “hornet's nest,” Miller said this April in a teleconference with reporters. He said he was amazed by “the ability of guys to bound towards the enemy fire.”

The US forces had no time to think. Miller “was on his third magazine change before he had a conscious

thought,” said Lt. Col. Sean McClane, his commanding officer at the time and now head of the Air National Guard's 123rd Special Tactics Squadron, Miller's home unit, at Louisville Arpt., Ky.

After fighting his way off the helicopter, Miller began tending to the wounded and dead, establishing a casualty collection point. Four members of his QRF had already been killed by enemy fire, and five more were seriously wounded. “Regardless of what's going on,” Brown said, Miller was “focusing on the casualties, the patients, the triage.”

The situation was tough for rendering aid. The air was thin, and Miller was working in up to four feet of snow on the ground. “Not only was it extremely cold, we were at 11,500 feet,” Miller said. “So we were dealing with hypoxia and other things ... affecting the trauma of the patients.”

Miller was forced to switch between providing first aid and getting into the fight. While the Rangers were battling their way up the mountain in an attempt to overrun the enemy bunker, Miller also left cover multiple times—exposing himself to heavy RPG fire—to bring ammunition to the team's various fighting positions.

He recovered a radio abandoned by a wounded team member and set up a second satellite communication line with home base, passing critical information about the status of the casualties and assault force.

At one point, he noticed a weak spot in the way the team had deployed, and he dislodged and repositioned the Chinook's tail gun to cover the gap.

Miller realized that the casualty collection point he'd established was too vulnerable. As the Rangers worked their way up the mountain, he began venturing out into enemy fire once again to move the wounded to a more protected spot. This slow, laborious process required Miller to repeatedly expose himself to direct enemy fire as he tried to save the wounded team members.

Almost eight hours after their helicopter crashed, the Rangers with Miller's team finally overran the Taliban bunker firing on them from the north, and they took the higher ground of that enemy position.

Brown had called in close air support from AC-130 gunships, and this proved decisive. From the new vantage point, Miller's team was able to spot and identify Roberts, who as it turned out had been killed by al Qaeda fighters, and TSgt. John A. Chapman, an Air Force combat controller who had died in an attempt earlier that day to rescue Roberts. Miller used the helicopter's rappelling rope to retrieve their bodies, in case they had been booby trapped.

His team carried the wounded up the slope to the new position, where they would be safer. Before they had completed the relocations, al Qaeda fighters began firing from a new position from the south. Cunningham, the PJ, was hit and eventually died from the wound. He was posthumously awarded the Air Force Cross for his heroism during the battle. Chapman was also posthumously awarded an Air Force Cross for his efforts to save Navy SEAL Roberts that day.

As they waited for a night rescue, temperatures began to fall, hypothermia became a pressing issue, and the team began to run out of supplies. "We had gone through all our medical gear," Miller said, and "we were maxing out our capability" to treat the wounded. He resorted to stripping insulation out of the helicopter to create makeshift shelters to keep the injured warm.

After 17 hours, Miller was still caring for three critically injured litter patients, as well as other wounded troops, when four helicopters from the Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment arrived to extract his team, the wounded, and the dead. He had saved the lives of team members and helped recover the bodies of the two killed in action.



At Hurlburt Field, Fla., on April 20, USAF Chief of Staff Gen. David Goldfein (left) presents Miller with the Air Force Cross—the highest service-specific award for valor.



L-r: Miller, SrA. Jason Cunningham, and SSgt. Gabe Brown (now a major) before the Battle of Takur Gar. Cunningham died from wounds sustained during that mission.

There was little reason to think the team would ever come back, McClane said. "Given the odds against them, they probably shouldn't have been successful, and yet they were."

Miller said his training made all the difference. During special tactics training, one of his supervisors was an Air Force Cross recipient. "We always had a saying," he said. "Train as you fight. That's what we did." The preparation "teaches you how to survive in really terrible situations"—and none worse than atop Takur Gar.

On April 20, 2017, Miller received the Air Force Cross at a ceremony at Hurlburt Field, Fla. Chief of Staff Gen. David L. Goldfein presented the award and told Miller that he represented "the finest traits America can ask of its warriors."

Despite their best-in-the-world training, this battle confronted the team with challenges it had never faced before, Miller told reporters before the ceremony. In 2002, the US was still new to Afghanistan, and US special operations forces were still learning how to fight this enemy. "That day we had things that weren't proven yet in tactics that we were able to pull off," Miller said.

He told reporters that some of the things he did at 11,500 feet "have been done in training or have been thought about on the chalkboard, but haven't been performed ... out in the battlefield."

Col. Michael E. Martin, commander of the 24th Special Operations Wing at Hurlburt, was involved in Operation Anaconda at the time. It was Miller's leadership on Takur Gar that most impressed him, Martin told *Air Force Magazine*. He imagines one of the most difficult aspects of the mission for Miller was the loss of his teammate Cunningham.

"His young pararescueman that he was responsible for [was] bleeding out," and yet Miller had the fortitude to "keep calm during chaos," Martin said.

"I remember the calls to try to get [Cunningham] off the mountaintop in broad daylight when no one would risk another helo to go in there," Martin said. Miller was making some of those calls.

"I don't think you can find a finer example of someone who selflessly put himself at risk to save other people's lives," Martin said. ✪