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COURAGE
in the Courtyard

By Aaron M. U. Church, Senior Editor

MSgt. Ivan Ruiz earned the Air Force Cross for his efforts to save two wounded comrades from Taliban determined to kill the injured Americans.

Two CH-47 Chinook helicopters pounded through the early morning darkness of Dec. 10, 2013, bound for the village of Mushan—a Taliban hot spot 30 miles west of Kandahar, Afghanistan. MSgt. Ivan Ruiz, a pararescueman deployed with the 22nd Expeditionary Special Tactics Squadron, was inserting as the rescue specialist with a 12-man Army Special Forces Alpha Team and some 40 Afghan commandos on a clearing operation.

The objective area was "known to harbor insurgents, weapons caches, and improvised explosive devices," noted Ruiz.

Inserting at 4 a.m., the air assault force hoped to catch insurgents in the area by surprise.

The twin-rotor Chinooks whipped up a dust storm approaching the landing zone. Ruiz and his team ran down the helicopter's rear ramp into a brownout and were promptly greeted by enemy gunfire as the Chinooks departed back to base. "As soon as we exited the aircraft, we begin taking fire," he told *Air Force Magazine* in an interview.

Several AH-64 Apache attack helicopters had accompanied the Chinooks, and combat controller TSgt. Matthew McKenna—also embedded with the team—called for clearance to unleash the "gun birds." With surprise already shattered, the Apaches opened fire with their 30 mm chain guns, handily "neutralizing the threat," according to Ruiz. His team moved toward the village and breached the surrounding wall to gain access to

a suspected insurgent stronghold. After they were through, "we were then told to go conduct damage assessment" of the Apaches' handiwork.

The helicopters had been firing at an enemy site, and Ruiz pushed on with several Special Forces and a squad of Afghans to check it out. "On the way in, we ended up clearing a couple of IEDs, and as soon as we were 50 yards from the compound, we began taking fire," Ruiz recounted.

An insurgent had taken up a firing position on top of the compound and now Ruiz' squad was once again under

A US Army Apache helicopter lands at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan. Apaches fired on the enemy site but did not clear it out enough for the team on MSgt. Ivan Ruiz's mission.

MSgt. Ivan Ruiz in Afghanistan in 2013. In addition to being awarded the Air Force Cross, Ruiz received a Bronze Star Medal with Valor for actions in another firefight in September 2013.

fire. The 15 or so troops in Ruiz' group split into three elements to storm the compound simultaneously from several different points. Someone succeeded in dropping the machine gunner "and I set my guys up as security outside the compound guarding the door," Ruiz said.

SECOND THOUGHTS

The two other elements proceeded into the compound's courtyard and rushed toward the main building. "One of the Special Forces guys threw two grenades into that building" before shouting to the insurgents inside to come out and surrender. Four individuals emerged from the doorway into the darkness and "seemed to surrender," said Ruiz.

Instead, they were carrying rifles "and immediately we started engaging," with the joint US-Afghan team killing all four of the fighters just outside the doorway.

At about this time, the Afghan National Army troops began having second thoughts about the operation. They decided to wait for sunrise to finish securing the compound—"which wasn't the right answer," Ruiz stressed. "We needed to get things done, because we were already inside the compound." The Special Forces team leader pressed the Afghans to "finish what we came there to do" said Ruiz, but "it wasn't happening—they weren't going for it."

With the Afghans taking the bench, Ruiz and two of the Green Berets

A UH-60 Black Hawk medevac heli-copter lands in the Afghanistan dust. Ruiz and his comrade loaded the two wounded Americans on a Black Hawk and got them life-saving medical care.
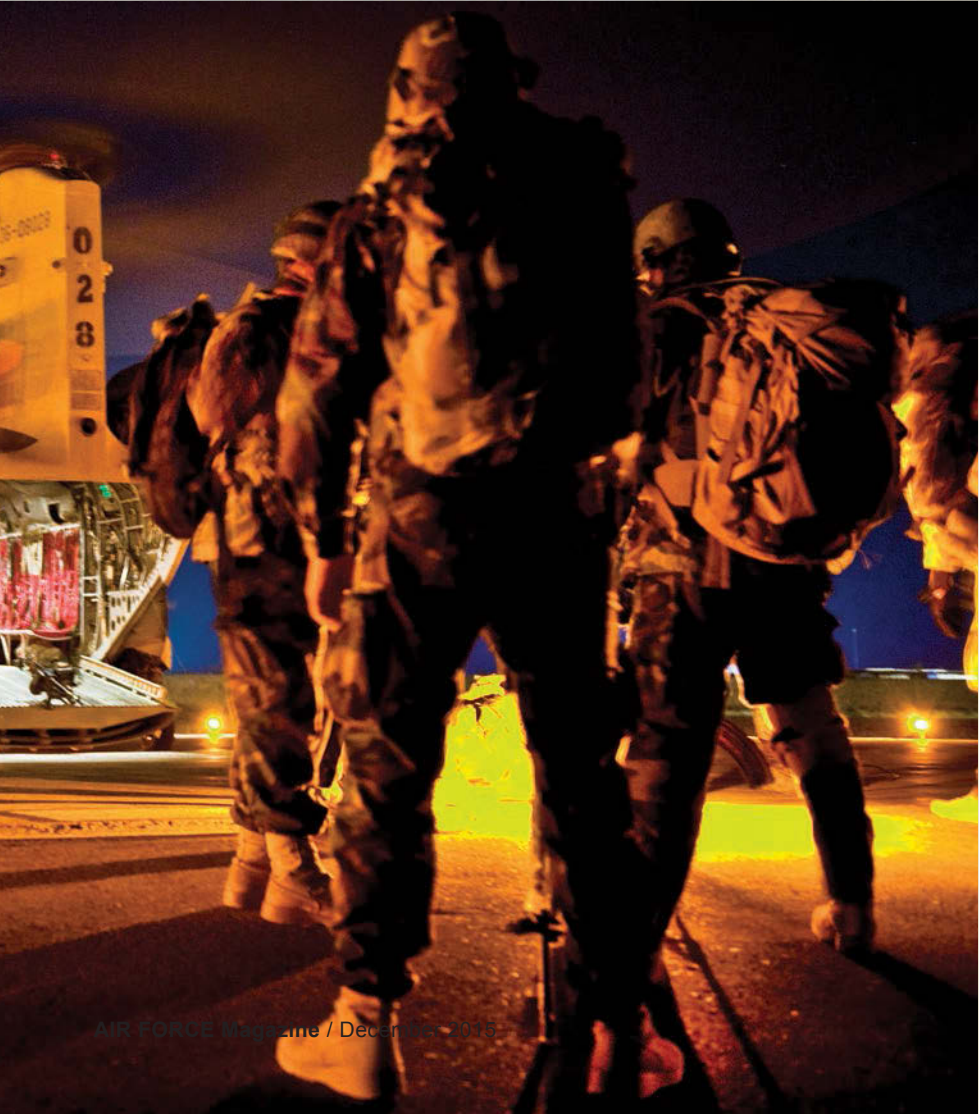
"decided to go ahead and sweep the courtyard" on their own.

The three spread out toward two small, mud huts 75 feet or so across the courtyard—one to each side ahead of Ruiz. "I had a bad feeling about the mud hut to my left, so I stopped short while the other two guys continued to move through," he said. Ruiz took up a defensive position just outside the doorway and several seconds later, an insurgent with a rifle appeared at the entrance. Ruiz instantaneously shot him and as the enemy fell backward into the hut, bullets sparked off the ground near him. One of the Green Berets who had advanced beyond Ruiz was struck in the chest, with a round igniting the tracers in a magazine tucked into his gear. Then the other soldier went down.

Through night-vision goggles, "I could see my two buddies fall to the ground, so I turned and began engaging where I felt that the fire was coming from" judging by how they fell, Ruiz explained.

The shooter was in the second mud hut to Ruiz' right, so he started moving toward the target. As he approached the hut, he could see that advancing to the left would funnel him into a tight spot. He attempted instead to advance toward the injured comrades ahead of him, but the shooter had Ruiz in his sights, making it impossible for the airman to move up.

Ruiz held short, firing at the hut until he made out silhouettes of the shooters. "I saw that they were holding their AK-47s outside the windows and the doors, trying to reach the guys they had already hit on the ground," Ruiz said. He was determined to prevent the shooters from venturing outside the hut for a clear shot at his already injured comrades and fired at the windows and doors to keep the enemy inside.

As he traded shots with the insurgents, Ruiz started hearing "rounds coming from behind" him, from the Afghan troops who had decided to re-

Afghan commandos and US forces board a CH-47 Chinook in Kandahar province, Afghanistan, in 2010. US and Afghan military members differed on how to clear the enemy stronghold during the December 2013 firefight in Mushan.

USAF photo by SSgt. Jonathan Snyder

Courtesy photo via MSgt. Ivan Ruiz

USAF photo by A1C Jeff Parkinson

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join the fray and were spraying gunfire over his head. "At that point, I realized, 'This is where I'm going to stand; this is where my fight's going to be—whatever happens, happens," reflected Ruiz. The shootout continued for several minutes. Ruiz managed to make it to within 25 feet of the hut—still about 15 feet from his squad mates lying on the ground ahead and to his right—all while suppressing enemy fire.

Another Special Forces soldier eventually joined Ruiz and kept up suppressive fire while Ruiz attempted to low-crawl forward to begin treating the wounded. "Rounds were hitting right in front of me so I had to stop. I got back to my knee, started suppressing again."

Ruiz was trying to reload his M4 carbine while looking through his night-vision goggles when his partner shouted, "Grenade!"

He heard the grenade "fall right in front of us with the sound of a rock," but they couldn't see it, Ruiz said. "We pretty much jumped on each other, trying to cover each other from the blast, and we waited. Nothing happened for about five seconds. No blast, so we just got back to our knees and started engaging."

A minute later, using his night-vision device, Ruiz saw a drape in the hut window move. "I was visually able to see one of the bad guys, so I pointed my laser" at the window, Ruiz said, and he called out to his buddy to toss in a grenade. "He throws a grenade right into the window—the blast goes off, and then immediately, a grenade comes back out at us," Ruiz said. The two jumped on each other again and Ruiz recalled tilting his helmet forward to shield as best he could from the explosion. "I could feel the blast come over us," but the attack was ineffective and both Americans scrambled back to their knees and began firing again. Ruiz tried low-crawling to the casualties once more only to be blocked by the snap of bullets impacting directly in front of him.

GETTING THE UPPER HAND

A third grenade thudded down next to Ruiz, his buddy, and an Afghan commando who had just come up from behind. The other two troops jumped up to move away from the grenade while Ruiz stayed low. "They both got blasted off their feet," he recalled.

The Green Beret miraculously popped up and he and Ruiz resumed firing at the hut. "At this time our team sergeant decides that he's going to quit messing around with the commandos and he's going to do what he needs to

do," Ruiz said. "He pretty much came through a hail of gunfire to our left and was able to find a good position" he could use to effectively keep the enemy's heads down.

Once the team sergeant was confident he'd gained the upper hand and had the enemy bottled up, he shouted to Ruiz and his comrade to reach the wounded again. "We were able to drag them back to a small area where I was able to treat them" using the night-vision equipment to see the wounds. "As soon as I was done packaging and administering whatever aid I could, the Army medevac bird landed," said Ruiz. The UH-60 helicopter touched down outside the compound, roughly 150 feet from where Ruiz was treating the two SF soldiers. "We immediately got them moving, got them on the bird, passed all my medical information over to the aircrew," and quickly rejoined the fight back in the compound.

The team finished clearing the compound, and "including the Apache engagements, … we ended up killing 13 bad guys and we removed a large weapons cache, IEDs, and some communications devices they were using against us," said Ruiz. The Alpha Team and Afghan commandos held the village for another 36 hours.

Operations to eradicate insurgents and break the enemy stronghold on the area around Mushan had begun in 2009 when US forces had first tried to clear it, so it had taken four years to secure the village. The Special Forces team still operating in the area now has "said that there's nothing going on in that village" since that day, Ruiz said.

Ruiz received the Air Force Cross—the service's highest award for valor in combat and the second highest US military honor. Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James presented the Air Force Cross to Ruiz in a ceremony at Hurlburt Field, Fla., on Dec. 17, 2014.

"Today we are adding his name to an extremely small list of five additional airmen, since Sept. 11, 2001, who demonstrated this highest caliber of service and excellence," James said. The cross is reserved for "unequaled courage and bravery despite overwhelming odds, and that's exactly what he did." ✪

Far left: Ruiz plants a flag during a 2013 mission in Afghanistan. Left: Ruiz at the ceremony where Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James (l) awarded him the Air Force Cross.