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PJ'S EXTRAORDINARY HEROISM EARNS AIR FORCE CROSS



Master Sgt. Ivan Ruiz, a Pararescueman from the 56th Rescue Squadron, Royal Air Force Lakenheath, England, smiles after being presented the Air Force Cross for extraordinary heroism in combat during a ceremony at the Freedom Hangar on Hurlburt Field, Fla., Dec. 17, 2014. The Air Force Cross is the second highest U.S. military decoration a member of the Air Force can receive. (U.S. Air Force photo/Senior Airman Christopher Callaway)

HURLBURT FIELD, Fla. -- Recognizing extraordinary heroism shown in combat, Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James presented the Air Force Cross to an Air Commando during a ceremony here, Dec. 17.

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Master Sgt. Ivan Ruiz, a Pararescueman deployed with the 22nd Expeditionary Special Tactics Squadron, was awarded the U.S. military's second highest decoration for an Airman. He earned the medal for protecting and saving the lives of two wounded teammates while under heavy enemy fire at close range during combat operations in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, Dec. 10, 2013.

"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."

While moving through several compounds after infiltrating enemy territory with his special operations forces counterparts, Ruiz and two U.S. Army Special Forces teammates be-



Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James pins the Air Force Cross to the uniform of Master Sgt. Ivan Ruiz, a Pararescueman from the 56th Rescue Squadron, Royal Air Force Lakenheath, England, during a ceremony at the Freedom Hangar on Hurlburt Field, Fla., Dec. 17, 2014. While deployed to Afghanistan with the 22nd Expeditionary Special Tactics Squadron, Ruiz protected his injured special operations forces teammates with fire support and provided emergency medical care under intense enemy fire in the dark, Dec. 10, 2013. (U.S. Air Force photo/Senior Airman Christopher Callaway)

"We reserve the Air Force Cross for those special few who exhibit unequalled courage and bravery despite overwhelming odds, and that's exactly what (Ruiz) did," James said.

came separated from the main friendly element. They were immediately confronted by four insurgents in a point-blank engagement. Ruiz and his teammates quickly killed the enemy, but suddenly became trapped in a courtyard by vicious and intense insurgent crossfire.

"I didn't really think, I reacted," Ruiz said. "Anytime something bad happens in my career, I just fall back on my training. It prepares us for what we can encounter when we are doing our work."

The two Soldiers were immediately wounded by the enemy's barrage of heavy gunfire and grenades, rendering them immobile and exposed. According to the medal citation, Ruiz sprinted through the waves of gunfire with complete disregard for his own personal safety to defend his teammates in their exposed position.

"I just wanted to make sure my guys didn't get hurt any more than they already were," Ruiz said. "I just wanted to do my job."

Refusing to take cover or leave his wounded teammates exposed to potentially fatal shots, Ruiz continued to fight the enemy alone in the courtyard until reinforcements



Master Sgt. Ivan Ruiz, a Pararescueman from the 56th Rescue Squadron, Royal Air Force Lakenheath, England, displays his Air Force Cross citation with Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James at the Freedom Hangar on Hurlburt Field, Fla., Dec 17, 2014. Ruiz earned the Air Force Cross while deployed with the 22nd Expeditionary Special Tactics Squadron, and assigned to the 23rd STS at Hurlburt Field, Fla. (U.S. Air Force photo/Airman 1st Class Jeff Parkinson)

Ruiz was forced to fight lying flat on the ground due to grenades exploding around him, some only 15 feet from his position. He continued to return fire at multiple enemy locations to prevent enemy fighters from maneuvering toward his teammates.

arrived. Once they did, he advanced again through a hail of gunfire, dragged his teammates to a nearby position of concealment and immediately administered life-saving trauma care. Due to the lack of light, Ruiz had to use night vision goggles to administer the care.

"It is not an understatement at all to say that you have made an indelible imprint on Air Force history," James said to Ruiz prior to presenting the Air Force Cross medal.

Lt. Gen. Brad Heithold, the commander of Air Force Special Operations Command, opened

the ceremony by addressing the Airmen and guests who packed the venue's seats and sidelines.

"This is what 'right' looks like," he said. "This is when Air Commandos from all specialties come out and recognize the heroic deeds of one of our fellow Air Commandos. This is a proud day for Air Force Special Operations Command and for the U.S. Air Force."

Also in attendance were two of Ruiz's Army Special Forces teammates on the mission, one of whom Ruiz saved in the courtyard that night.

"I have a great deal of respect for what (Ruiz) and guys like him bring to the fight," the Soldier said. "It's always good to know you have guys like that out there with you."



Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James and Master Sgt. Ivan Ruiz, a Pararescueman from the 56th Rescue Squadron, Royal Air Force Lakenheath, England, listen to the award citation during an Air Force Cross ceremony at the Freedom Hangar on Hurlburt Field, Fla., Dec. 17, 2014. During a 2013 deployment to Afghanistan, Ruiz protected injured special operations forces with fire support and provided emergency medical care under intense enemy fire in the dark, directly resulting in two U.S. lives saved. (U.S. Air Force photo/Airman 1st Class Jeff Parkinson)

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Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James congratulates Master Sgt. Ivan Ruiz, a Pararescueman from the 56th Rescue Squadron, Royal Air Force Lakenheath, England, on receiving the Air Force Cross at the Freedom Hangar on Hurlburt Field, Fla., Dec. 17, 2014. Ruiz is the sixth U.S. military member to receive the nation's second highest military decoration since 9/11. (U.S. Air Force photo/Senior Airman Christopher Callaway)



Air Commandos and members of the community gather in the Freedom Hangar for a ceremony recognizing Master Sgt. Ivan Ruiz, a Pararescueman from the 56th Rescue Squadron, Royal Air Force Lakenheath, England, who was awarded the Air Force Cross on Hurlburt Field, Fla., Dec. 17, 2014. Ruiz was also awarded a Bronze Star with Valor for actions taken and a Bronze Star for his tour during the same deployment to Afghanistan from July 2013 to January 2014 with Army Special Forces. (U.S. Air Force photo/Senior Airman Christopher Callaway)