

PJ awarded Air Force Cross Dec 17, 2014

(Note: See end of this article for information on his earlier award of the Bronze Star with Valor)



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.

An Air Force pararescueman received the nation's second-highest award for valor Wednesday.

Master Sgt. Ivan Ruiz, who was deployed with the 22nd Expeditionary Special Tactics Squadron last December in Afghanistan, was presented with the Air Force Cross on Dec. 17 at Hurlburt Field, Florida.

Ruiz was with a team of Army Special Forces soldiers in Kandahar Province on Dec. 10, 2013, when his team came under heavy enemy fire at a close range.

While moving through several compounds in enemy territory, Ruiz and his two teammates became separated from the rest of the group and were confronted by four insurgents point-blank. Ruiz and the soldiers quickly killed the insurgents, but were then encircled by "vicious" crossfire.

"I didn't really think, I reacted," Ruiz said during the award ceremony. "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 hit by gunfire and grenades, leaving them exposed and wounded. Ruiz sprinted through gunfire "with complete disregard for his own personal safety" and ran to defend the soldiers.

Ruiz positioned himself flat on the ground, grenades exploding around him. He returned fire to multiple locations, keeping the insurgents from coming toward his teammates.

"I just wanted to make sure my guys didn't get hurt any more than they already were," Ruiz said at the ceremony, according to American Forces News Service. "I just wanted to do my job."

Ruiz would not take cover or leave his teammates, and continued the fight alone in the courtyard until reinforcements could arrive. When friendlies came, he ran through gunfire to retrieve the wounded soldiers, drag them to safety and treat them, providing life-saving care, according to the medal citation.

"It is not an understatement to say that you have made an indelible imprint on Air Force history," Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James said at the ceremony.

Ruiz is one of six airmen awarded the Air Force Cross since Sept. 11, 2001. The Air Force Cross is second only to the Medal of Honor for the nation's highest valor awards.

"This is what 'right' looks like," Lt. Gen. Brad Heithold, commander of Air Force Special Operations Command, said at the ceremony, according to AFNS. "This is when Air Commandos from all specialties come out and recognize the heroic deeds of one of our fellow Air Commandos." The two soldiers Ruiz saved were able to attend the ceremony. "I have a great deal of respect for what (Ruiz) and guys like him bring to the fight," one of the soldiers said. "It's always good to know you have guys like that out there with you."

This is the second time this year Ruiz has been awarded for valor. In October, he was presented with a Bronze Star for another operation in September 2013 in Afghanistan. During a 13-hour battle, Ruiz climbed a hillside and exposed himself to enemy fire to suppress an insurgent force. He directed fire on eight insurgent fighting positions, helping to repel enemy attacks and contributing to 103 insurgent deaths.