

USAF PJ awarded Silver Star and 2 Bronze Stars, Summits Denali



USAF Staff Sgt. Bill Cenna had a pretty good year. Not only did he face the -40 degree temperatures of Mt. McKinley, or Denali, as it's known to Alaskans, he was recently awarded the Silver Star and two Bronze Stars for valor in combat in Afghanistan. These awards were from 3 engagements with the enemy during two separate deployments. From Joint Base Elmendorf Richardson public affairs article:

Although he insists any pararescueman would have been equally valiant, Cenna admits that the situation during which he earned the Silver Star was special. He and a team of fellow PJs were sent in to recover a pair of OH-58 Kiowa Warrior helicopter pilots who had crashed in the mountains of Afghanistan. After recovering one of the two pilots, Cenna and a teammate were dropped close to the crash site to contract the second, who they soon would learn had died from his injuries. Enemy combatants' gunfire then forced the recovery helicopter to retreat, and the two of them, with the assistance of friendly combat aircraft, were forced to fight off enemy combatants for more than five hours while protecting the remains of the pilot and maintaining the integrity of the crash site.

"There were a lot of close calls. It was a mix of skill and luck that we're still alive," Cenna said. "There were times when we would have to take cover and use our overhead air support in the fight. As aircraft were flying over, the brass [from the rounds they were firing] was landing right next to us. It was raining brass."

Cenna and his fellow pararescueman were eventually able to outlast the enemy and successfully recover the remains of the American pilot and others who did not survive the battle. He said the key to their survival was to remember their training.