

3 Alaska pararescuers receive medals for action in Afghanistan

Medical team tended and hoisted the wounded to safety while under fire.

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Three Alaska National Air Guard pararescuemen received Distinguished Flying Crosses for heroic actions in Afghanistan in a predawn ceremony Saturday on Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson.

Sr. Master Sgt. Christopher Widener, Master Sgt. Brandon Stuenkel and Staff Sgt. Aaron Parcha were part of a medical team credited with extracting soldiers of a U.S. Army task force who came under heavy attack in Operation Bulldog Bite in November 2010, tending numerous wounded troops and saving several lives while taking enemy fire themselves.

Citations read at the ceremony said the guardsmen flew into the Pech River Valley in helicopters, were dropped into the battle zone on cables, tended to the wounded and safely hoisted the casualties out "as the enemy raked the hovering helicopter and the landing zone with small arms fire." They

were repeatedly exposed to enemy fire and helicopters were heavily damaged by bullets and shrapnel.

One of the Alaska team members, Staff Sgt. Jimmy Settle, suffered a head wound early in the action and was returned to base. Other team members were told that they did not have to continue the assignment if they felt too distressed by Settle's injury and that other medics would be found. All volunteered to head back into the fight.

Though he holds the senior rank, Widener asked that the other team members receive their medals before him. "I'm honored to stand among these men," he told the Anchorage Daily News.

The Elmendorf Theater was filled to capacity with military personnel, family members and guests, including Sen. Lisa Murkowski.

The Saturday ceremony followed the awarding of Bronze Stars with Valor to three other Alaska National guardsmen with the 176th Wing's 212 Rescue Squadron on Oct. 13. Capt. Koaali C. "Koa" Bailey and Staff Sgt.

Theodore M. Sierociński were recognized for their actions in Operation Bulldog Bite. Tech. Sgt. Shane J. Hargis was honored for a separate action in Afghanistan.

Hargis's citation noted that on April 23, 2011, he came under heavy fire while rescuing a survivor of a helicopter crash in the Tagab Valley. He was preparing to hoist the wounded man into a waiting helicopter when a barrage opened on the aircraft and the cable was sheared, leaving him and the survivor stranded. Hargis took cover with the survivor until a second helicopter arrived. Incoming fire damaged that aircraft too.

"Hargis shielded the survivor with his body while engaging enemy positions with his personal weapon," risking his life "multiple times that day," the citation says.

The Alaska rescue squadron has been deployed to Afghanistan several times. Between deployments it provides search-and-rescue services in the most remote regions of the state, often in extreme conditions.

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Operation Bulldog Bite was a joint U.S. and Afghan counter-insurgent mission conducted in Kunar Province, Afghanistan, in November 2010.

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