

**LACKLAND AIR FORCE BASE, Texas** -- A pararescueman was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross with valor during a ceremony at Forbes Hall Monday. The Distinguished Flying Cross is awarded to officers or enlisted members who distinguish themselves in combat by performing acts of heroism or extraordinary achievement while participating in an aerial flight.



Staff Sgt. John Hatzidakis, a pararescue instructor with the 342nd Training Squadron, received the medal from Lt. Gen. Douglas Owens, Air Education and Training Command vice commander, for heroic actions during the evacuation of a critically wounded British soldier near Lashkar Gah, Afghanistan, March 19, 2009.

While en route to Camp Bastion, the HH-60G Pave Hawk carrying Sergeant Hatzidakis, five other crew members, and a wounded British soldier, was struck in the tail by a rocket-propelled grenade.

Blown back by the explosion while attending to the soldier's wounds, Sergeant Hatzidakis immediately used his body to shield the patient from flying debris. He checked to see if others needed medical attention before assisting with damage assessment in the rear of the helicopter.

The attack came on a second trip out of Lashkar Gah that day. Sergeant Hatzidakis was rewrapping a bandage on the wounded soldier's arm when the RPG struck the aircraft about a quarter mile away from Lashkar Gah, leaving the tail section barely hanging on.

"I was just doing my job and what I thought was right," Sergeant Hatzidakis said. "(When we were hit) a

lot of things went through my mind. My first thoughts were to check my patient and team member, talk to the pilot, and then see if anyone else was shooting at us."

Staff Sgt. Christopher Nilson, the pararescue team leader onboard an accompanying Pave Hawk, said the two aircraft had just switched sides.

"We didn't see them (the attackers) from the aircraft. It must have been like we flew over the bad guys and then Sergeant Hatzidakis' aircraft came across," said Sergeant Nilson. "I guess it was lucky for the bad guys."

Luck is also how Sergeant Hatzidakis described it.

"For some reason, they had a lucky shot," he said. "But we had a lucky day and we're all alive. An inch or two further toward the cabin where I was located and one of us would have been hurt."

The lead Pave Hawk circled back after the attack for an in-air assessment. As the pilots discussed maneuverability of the damaged helicopter, a response of, "It's actually flying better," was heard over the radio. The pilot's comment inadvertently helped relieve the tension.

"The time between when Sergeant Hatzidakis' aircraft was hit and the pilot's comment was very, very tense," Sergeant Nilson said. "His pilot is a matter-of-fact kind of guy who we knew from home base. I think he literally meant it, that it was actually flying a little bit better."

After the damaged helicopter landed safely at Camp Bastion, Sergeant Hatzidakis said the wounded British soldier kept asking him, "What happened; what happened?"

"You had a real bad day," he told his patient, who'd been shot earlier that morning. "But, you're all right now."