



Air Force Staff Sgt. Zachary Hoeh received the Distinguished Flying Cross with Valor for dropping into mine-laden terrain near the Afghan border with Pakistan to rescue a soldier who was frozen in the midst of an active minefield after the soldier's squad was decimated by successive IED blasts. Hoeh is seen here at Kadena Air Base earlier this year.

Kandahar province, Afghanistan — Air Force Senior Airman Zachary Hoeh scanned the hard-packed hillsides of the Afghanistan desert on May 26, 2011, looking for enemy triggermen who had virtually wiped out a squad of U.S. Army Pathfinders with improvised explosive devices. He knew they were out there, their fingers possibly on the trigger, waiting for him to land. He also knew a critically wounded soldier and two of his comrades needed to be evacuated quickly if they were to survive. After his sister Guardian Angel aircraft from the 46th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron picked up two of the soldiers, it lost power and almost crashed. Ignoring the risks, Hoeh sprang into action. He was lowered into the mine-laden terrain where he extricated the final soldier in less than 15 seconds, treating him for advanced shock as they raced time and their dwindling fuel supply to make it back to base. The fact he avoided the other explosive devices that surrounded the position has been called a miracle by military officials. In August, Hoeh was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross with “V” device for valor — the third-highest medal that a flight crewmember can receive — for the rescue. Now a staff sergeant with the 31st Rescue Squadron at Kadena Air Base on Okinawa, the 29-year-old pararescueman is an uneasy hero. “It does kind of feel weird for one person to sit down [for this interview] because there were a lot of other people involved,” the soft-spoken Hoeh told Stars and Stripes recently. “I wasn’t a hero. I think we did something important that day but I couldn’t have done it alone. I know it sounds cheesy but there really aren’t other words.” Hoeh was an Army brat in Germany, spending the majority of his time in Hohenfels and Kaiserslautern. He joined the Air Force in 2008 with his sights set on being a pararescueman. “What appealed to me was being part of a specialized force [that would be called upon] when there weren’t a whole lot of other options,” he said. Pararescuemen are combat paramedics who care for or extract patients from any situation, by land or by sea. They are trained to parachute, dive or be lowered into a combat zone on a hoist to extract the injured or sick. The importance of their mission is not taken lightly by those who perform it, Hoeh said. He was stationed out of Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada when he was tapped for his first combat deployment in spring 2011. Hoeh recalls two teams working two shifts during the entire four-month deployment. They flew on about 50 missions before May 26, performing medical evacuations from forward operating bases as well evacuating casualties from the field. Some landing zones were hot, while others contained IEDs. “There are different situations and you have to be ready for it,” Hoeh said. “It’s a pretty

versatile career field because there are techniques and stuff that are pretty solid, but then there's always something else to refine or a new problem to solve." That day, Hoeh was in the middle of his shift when his team got a quick launch call to Shorabak district, Kandahar province. He and two others flew 45 minutes toward the Pakistani border in the second of two Sikorsky HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopters. They had very few details about what they were walking into. "They were like, 'Go find Bob in the woods,'" Hoeh recalled. When they arrived, they found a Bell OH-58 Kiowa helicopter on the scene. They were stunned to learn a squad of Pathfinders had been decimated by IEDs. There were 10 killed in a succession of large blasts. "They lost a lot of guys," Hoeh said. "It was a pretty terrible day for everybody." Three were still alive on the deck but they were frozen in place by the minefield that had almost swallowed them up. A junior soldier had taken control of the squad after everyone else had been killed. Hoeh is credited with helping to develop the rescue plan. He searched the area for triggermen while the other helicopter picked up two soldiers, including one who was critically wounded. Due to shifting winds, the lead helicopter lost power and began to rapidly descend toward the desert floor. They were narrowly saved by the pilot's quick thinking and evasive maneuvering. Hoeh volunteered to extract the final isolated soldier. He was lowered right down on top of him. He hooked the soldier to the hoist and signaled for them to be pulled up. He didn't have time to think about the mines around them. "There's very little time for thought and worry," Hoeh said. "They're more scared that I'm not going to come than I am to go. I really just put myself in their shoes." They sped back to Kandahar Air Field, calling for a refuel the entire time. One never came. After dropping the wounded off at the hospital, the lead helicopter was so low on fuel that it couldn't make it to the refueling station. Hoeh's citation is clear when it comes to his courage that day. "The outstanding heroism and selfless devotion to duty displayed by Airman Hoeh reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force," the citation reads. Hoeh's current commander, Lt. Col. Charles Bris-Bois, agreed. He said Hoeh is intelligent, athletic and has above-average medical and technical rescue skills. Hoeh has taken a leadership role on the base and has helped impart his knowledge to the younger class of pararescuemen. "He is among the very best of all of them," Bris-Bois said. "You never have any doubts when he's on the job that it's going to be done the way it's supposed to. He's a phenomenal asset to the squadron."