

## Silver Star PJ recounts 5 hours in firefight with Taliban



Master Sgt. Roger Sparks is congratulated by son Ozrik, right, and others after receiving the Silver Star, the third-highest military combat decoration that can be awarded to a member of the United States Armed Forces, during a ceremony held Friday, July 11, 2014, on Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson. Sparks, of the Alaska Air National Guard 212<sup>th</sup> Rescue Squadron, was honored for his actions during a firefight in Afghanistan in November of 2010.

Master Sgt. Roger Sparks had deployed to war zones too many times to count when he descended into a firefight in Afghanistan's Watapur Valley on the evening of Nov. 14, 2010.

A reconnaissance Marine for a decade and a pararescue jumper in Alaska's Air National Guard for nearly as long, he was no stranger to combat or close calls. He'd responded to plane crashes on Alaskan mountainsides and inserted himself into battlefields in Afghanistan.

But none of that prepared Sparks for Operation Bulldog Bite, a joint U.S.-Afghan mission against Taliban forces in a remote valley near the eastern border with Pakistan.

The firefight had raged for three days when Sparks and his teammates responded to a call from an Army platoon pinned down by a coordinated Taliban assault.

As their Pave Hawk circled the scene, the casualties grew from two to six. Sparks and combat rescue officer Capt. Koa Bailey, both from the 212<sup>th</sup> Rescue Squadron, had barely begun the c40-foot descent from the helicopter when enemy fire rained on them. Bullets struck the hoist three times as they made their way down; moments after their boots hit the ground, the blast of a rocket-propelled grenade knocked them off their feet.

For the next five hours, amid a hail of bullets and blasts, Sparks tended to the wounded, saving five lives and helping to return to their families four soldiers killed in the firefight.

When he returned to Alaska, Sparks couldn't bring himself to wash his bloodied uniform.

"A lot of guys died in my arms that night," he said.

For his actions, Sparks was awarded the Silver Star in a July 11 ceremony at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Alaska.

"Despite continued enemy fire and with no concern for his personal safety, Sergeant Sparks immediately performed lifesaving measures for nine wounded soldiers. He feverishly triaged chest wounds, punctured lungs, shattered hips, fist-sized blast holes, eviscerated stomachs and arterial bleeders with limited medical supplies and only the light of the moon," Sparks' citation for America's third highest military decoration for valor in combat reads. "Upon return of evacuation aircraft, Sergeant Sparks directed evacuation of the injured while briefing crews on each casualty's injuries and medical needs; choosing to remain behind until the last man departed."

### **One night in a days-long battle**

In a July 15 Air Force Times interview, Sparks recalled the gallantry of others: the helicopter pilots, the gunners, the flight engineers. "We were on the ground, but those guys were risking their lives just the same."

And the intense fighting of Nov. 14 was just one night in a days-long battle that resulted in dozens of casualties, he said. Only eight soldiers from the platoon escaped with no visible wounds.

"Nothing even in the movies comes close to what was taking place there. I don't know how we lived through it," Sparks said. "A lot of people came up to me to say that's Medal of Honor stuff."

The director of the Alaska Office of Veterans Affairs was one of them.

Verdie Bowen first heard the name Roger Sparks from a staff member in the office of Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, in early 2011. Bowen subsequently read an Anchorage Daily News story about Sparks' heroics.

"When I got to the end of the story, it said only a Silver Star would be given to him. I thought, no, this merits more. We need to put him in for something higher. I pulled out all the regulations for the Congressional Medal of Honor."

The award package was submitted but came back denied because it was incomplete, Sparks said.

Bowen met with the adjutant general and assistant adjutant general of the Alaska Army National Guard. He took another look at Sparks actions and the awards coming out of theater at the time. "We thought it fit within the Air Force Cross level."

Bowen put together a team that included investigators who gathered sworn statements from surviving witnesses from that night.

"We wrote a whole new package" and resubmitted it, he said. In September, his office learned the Air Force Cross for which Sparks had been recommended was downgraded to a Silver Star. That same day, Bowen met Sparks for the first time.

"People always told me he was a really tall guy. I've never met a pararescueman that tall. I'm not sure how he didn't get shot. He did tell me when the whole thing was over, he had six bullet holes in his vest, but none had hit him. I'm not sure how that happened, to tell the truth," Bowen said.

The Alaska VA director would later work to bring one of the men Sparks had saved that night, Karl Beilby, to the July 11 ceremony, where, Sparks said, "I got to talk with him, get some closure, look each other in the eyes and share something going on in our minds."

Beilby had been in the firefight for three days on Nov. 14 when a bullet pierced his lower back and exited through his abdomen, he said in a speech at the ceremony.

"We fought on until Roger Sparks and his team arrived," he said. "I do not remember a lot of what happened after that. I do remember laying on the ground and looking up at this very, very tall guy."

Bowen also arranged for Sparks' parents to attend, which was especially poignant for the guardsman because his father has terminal cancer.

Sparks said he's thankful to all those who worked to recognize him, from the VA to Guard leadership to members of Congress. "They overwhelmed me with support."

But whether he ultimately received a Medal of Honor or a Bronze Star mattered very little, he said.

"The only thing you can say about awards is some did less and got more and some did more and got less," Sparks said. "I definitely don't want to be the center point for the attention. Many of the guys we rescued are dead. The ones who are alive are so affected they won't talk to their wives about it. To celebrate it feels wrong."

## **'I wanted to do rescue'**

Sparks grew up in Watauga, Texas, near Fort Worth, the younger child of Roger and Ann Sparks. Both he and his sister joined the military right out of high school. His sister enlisted in the Army; Sparks chose the Marines.

"It was a way to get out of a small town," he said. He also romanticized force reconnaissance.

Sparks had been in a decade when the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, promised a life of continuous deployments. "It was quit or be killed," he said.

A husband and father of one young son at the time, "I was looking for something more family-friendly. I wanted to do rescue. I wanted to ... viscerally and intimately impact others' lives. The most active PJs in the world are the Alaska PJs," he said of the crews that perform an average of one rescue a week.

His new career did not disappoint. "In the first year, I did 13 rescues," Sparks said. "We're just as much or more operational stateside as we are deployed."

What happened at Watapur Valley left him with symptoms of post-traumatic stress — and a lot of grief.

When he mentioned having nightmares, he was temporarily removed from flight status while he received treatment for post-traumatic stress. He returned to regular duty in 2012 and was soon performing harrowing and heroic rescues in Alaska's wilderness.

Sparks continues to make peace with his experience and look toward the future.

"Reading World War I and Vietnam literature made me realize grief from combat is a timeless thing. I'm thankful I'm alive. I've got two great kids, a great wife, [Jennifer], a lot of supportive friends," he said. "I truly believe life is chance. When you get into events like that, it makes you think about religion and spirituality. I think life is chance, and it's what you do with that chance that really matters."

When Sparks returned to Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, within days of the fight in Watapur Valley, he met a film producer who was working on a documentary about the relationship between combat and tattooing.

Campbell, a New York-based tattoo artist with a long list of celebrity clients, spent three days inking the pararescuemen. Sparks got his sons' names tattooed on his chest: Orion and Ozric.

"I couldn't shake the healing effect it had on all of us," Sparks said.

Back in Alaska, he started his own tattooing company called Cathartic Ink, which he plans to pursue full-time after retirement.

But he's not ready to leave the Guard just yet.

A week after pinning on the Silver Star, Sparks was scheduled to deploy again — this time to the Horn of Africa.