

Pave Low pilot named Kolligian Award recipient

by Tech. Sgt. Nick Choy
Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs

6/9/2008 - **WASHINGTON (AFPN)** -- An Air Force helicopter pilot was named the 2008 recipient of the service's top safety award June 9.

Lt. Col. Eugene V. Becker from the 20th Special Operations Squadron at Hurlburt Field, Fla., was presented the Koren Kolligian Jr. trophy during a ceremony at the Pentagon.

Vice Chief of Staff General Duncan J. McNabb presented the award to Colonel Becker said the pilot's calm demeanor, quick thinking and eventual course of action saved the lives of his crew.

During a nighttime tactical training mission on Sept. 7, 2007, Colonel Becker's MH-53M Pave Low helicopter experienced a "catastrophic mechanical failure" while hovering over a training area. After overriding the aircraft's flight control system and calling in two maydays, he successfully negotiated 90-foot trees and a small-landing zone, and brought the aircraft into an auto-rotation landing. His actions not only saved the multi-million dollar aircraft, but the lives of his seven crewmembers, the citation said.



Lt. Col. Eugene V. Becker speaks to a crowd during a ceremony at the Pentagon, where he was presented the Koren Kolligian Jr. trophy June 9. Colonel Becker, assigned to the 20th Special Operations Squadron at Hurlburt Field, Fla., was flying an MH-53M Pave Low helicopter on a training mission when it suffered a catastrophic mechanical failure. Colonel Becker, with the help of his crew, was able to land the helicopter safely, saving the lives of all aboard. (U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. J.G. Buzanowski)



Lt. Col. Eugene V. Becker speaks to a crowd during a ceremony at the Pentagon, where he was presented the Koren Kolligian Jr. trophy June 9. Colonel Becker, assigned to the 20th Special Operations Squadron at Hurlburt Field, Fla., was flying an MH-53M Pave Low helicopter on a training mission when it suffered a catastrophic mechanical failure. Colonel Becker, with the help of his crew, was able to land the helicopter safely, saving the lives of all aboard. (U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. J.G. Buzanowski)

"When you talk about flying helicopters into a small-landing zone surrounded by trees, and you put night-vision goggles into the middle of it, it's about the hardest thing to do," General McNabb said as he recalled his own experience flying helicopters at Andrews Air Force Base, Md.

"If you end up with a critical gear box failure, and you're about to lose power, your ability to do everything perfectly is the only thing that will allow you to get to the ground safely," he said. "You put the two together; it takes it to a whole different level."

General McNabb highlighted Colonel Becker's calm response and ability to

think clearly during the emergency as the reason for the crew's survival. Furthermore, Colonel Becker calmly directed the actions of other crewmembers during the emergency landing--a trait taught to all Air Force aviators, General McNabb said.

During his speech, Colonel Becker mentioned each of his crew by name and praised their heroism and tenacity.

"It was a moment our crew trained for their entire careers," he said.

Colonel Becker, a command pilot with more than 4,600 flight hours in various Air Force helicopters, also touted the abilities of the Pave Low helicopter and its many accomplishments, ranging from search and rescue to special operation missions. He spoke fondly of the aircraft and their dedicated crews, bringing particular attention to his own helicopter; tail number 69-5794, which was heavily damaged in the crash.

"In her last 45 seconds in the air, she gave us the critical seconds we needed to get over a clear area. Her final act was to sacrifice herself so that her crew should live another day, though she would not," he said.

The Pave Low is scheduled to be retired from the Air Force inventory on Sept. 30, 2008.

Colonel Becker thanked those in attendance, including members of the Kolligian family, Lt. Gen. Donald C. Wurster, commander of Air Force Special Operations Command and Maj. Gen. Wendell L. Griffin, Air Force chief of safety. He also thanked several coworkers and former supervisors in attendance, including his own family for their support.

Colonel Becker also thanked the Kolligian family for turning a tragedy into an annual celebration by creating the award, named in honor of 1st Lt. Koren Kolligian Jr., a pilot whose T-33 Shooting Star went missing off the California coast in 1955.