



Moody rescue crews receive Mackay Trophy

by Senior Airman J.G. Buzanowski
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12/5/2005 - WASHINGTON (AFPN) -- Two HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter aircrews received the Mackay Trophy from Gen. John D. W. Corley, the Air Force vice chief of staff, at a ceremony here Dec. 5.

The 13 Airmen earned the award for rescuing five Soldiers whose helicopter crashed in a sandstorm near Kharbut, Iraq, in April 2004.

The rescue crews, from the 41st and 38th rescue squadrons at Moody Air Force Base, Ga., are:

Aircraft commanders: Capts. Bryan Creel and Robert Wrinkle.

Co-pilots: Maj. Joseph Galletti and Capt. Greg Rockwood.

Flight engineers: Tech. Sgts. Michael Preston and Staff Sgt. Patrick Ledbetter.

Aerial gunners: Master Sgt. Paul Silver and Tech. Sgt. Thomas Ringheimer.

Pararescuemen: Tech. Sgt. Matt Leigh and Staff Sgts. Vincent J. Eckert, John Griffin and Michael Rubio and Senior Airman Edward Ha.

General Corley was the keynote speaker at the Dec. 5 award ceremony. He praised the efforts of the entire combat search and rescue community and the trophy winners. He told the audience to remember these Airmen work "so that others may live."

"No matter what the weather is, no matter what the time of day it is, combat search and rescue forces will be ready to bring you back, be it Soldier, Sailor, Airmen or Marine," the general said. "The Air Force is proud to be part of this joint team in defending this nation."

The Army CH-47 Chinook helicopter was part of a three-ship re-supply mission April 16, 2004, when they ran into a sandstorm 70 miles southeast of Baghdad. The first and third helicopters were able to climb out.

The second helicopter tried to land to avoid any possible mid-air collisions. But, when the helicopter touched down, the right landing gear collapsed and the helicopter rolled onto its side.

Captain Creel and the Jolly 11 crew -- from the 41st -- got the call for the combat rescue operation. Despite intelligence reports of possible enemy threats -- and a raging sandstorm -- they, along with the Jolly 12 crew from the 38th RQS were airborne within 45 minutes.

While en route to the crash site, Captain Creel and his wingman, Captain Wrinkle, realized they would have to alter their flying to get to the downed aircrew. The sandstorm wreaked havoc and rendered their infrared and night vision goggles ineffective -- leaving the pilots to fly by instruments.

On their first approach, they flew right over the downed Soldiers. The two helicopters circled around and Captain Creel set down. Captain Wrinkle's helicopter provided cover and then landed so its pararescue team could help.

"I think they were worried we weren't going to go in for them," Captain Wrinkle said. "Once they were on board, they were quiet, solemn. I think they were just glad to be rescued."

Their perils were not over when the survivors were on board. On their way back to base, the helicopters came under attack and evaded several surface-to-air missiles and small arms fire.

"Combat search and rescue is a double-edged sword," Captain Creel said. "We want to go out and do our mission. But if we have to, it means someone needs our help and might be hurt."

Captain Creel was in awe of the prestige of the trophy when he saw it at the National Air and Space Museum -- especially after he saw the names of aviation pioneers and Air Force generals Chuck Yeager and Jimmy Doolittle on the trophy.

"To know we're in the same category as some of them is just a great honor," he said.

The Air Force and National Aeronautic Association present the McKay Trophy to Airmen or an organization involved in the "most meritorious flight of the year." The trophy was first awarded in 1911 and is on display at the National Air and Space Museum.



ARLINGTON, Va. (AFPN) -- Gen. John D. W. Corley, the Air Force vice chief of staff, (center right) presents the Mackay Trophy to the Airmen who rescued five Soldiers after their helicopter crashed in Iraq. They are (left to right) Staff Sgt. Vincent J. Eckert, Staff Sgt. John Griffin, Master Sgt. Paul Silver, Staff Sgt. Patrick Ledbetter, Maj. Joseph Galletti, Capt. Robert Wrinkle, Capt. Greg Rockwood, Tech. Sgt. Michael Preston, Capt. Bryan Creel, Staff Sgt. Michael Rubio and Tech. Sgt. Thomas Ringheimer. Not present at the ceremony were Tech. Sgt. Matt Leigh and Senior Airman Edward Ha. (U.S. Air Force photo by Donna Parry)