



AFSOC Pararescueman receives 2008 Pitsenbarger Award

by Capt. Amy Cooper
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6/23/2008 - **HURLBURT FIELD, Fla.** -- An Air Force Special Operations Command pararescueman has been named the 2008 Air Force Sergeants Association Pitsenbarger Award winner for his heroic actions during an October 2007 firefight against enemy combatants in Afghanistan.

Tech. Sgt. Davide Keaton, 24th Special Tactics Squadron, is personally responsible for saving the lives of five people during a shootout against Taliban fighters.

The five lives he saved, however, were not those of his coalition teammates--they were those of three Afghan children and two Afghan women who were used as human shields by the enemy.

The day of this particular mission started out no differently than others he experienced during his deployment, for which he was the sole pararescueman with an elite special operations team.

"We train the way we fight," Sergeant Keaton said. "I woke up that day with the same mentality. You have to be on top of your game or bad things can happen."

That training would be put into action when his team was attacked with small-arms fire and rocket-propelled grenades.

Once under attack, Sergeant Keaton risked his own life, moving 150 meters to reach a victim--a 7-year-old Afghan boy shot in the pelvis.

"When I came up to the first little boy, my heart stopped for a second," said the pararescueman. "He had a serious gunshot wound and had to be taken care of right away."

Sergeant Keaton used his own body to shield the boy from gunfire while tending to his wounds and then moved him to cover 30 meters away.

After stabilizing the first victim, Sergeant Keaton again braved the barrage of gunfire to find other victims.

His second patient, an 8-year-old boy, also had multiple gunshot wounds. After treating the bleeding and stabilizing the boy's spine, he carried the child to the casualty collection point.

When he got there, his third victim, an 11-year-old girl, was there in need of treatment.

"I'd never been in an operation like this," Sergeant Keaton said. "I had my hands full. It seemed like the kids were coming one at a time."

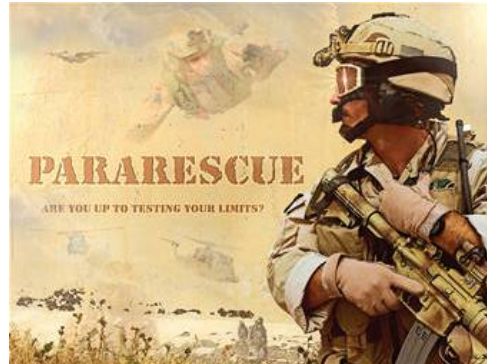
Sergeant Keaton remained focused despite the young age of his patients.

"You don't think about it," he said. "You just revert back to what you do in training--stabilize them and get them out as quick as possible."

Running low on supplies, Sergeant Keaton improvised gauze out of clothing to stop his victims' bleeding.

After stabilizing his second and third victims, Sergeant Keaton exposed himself to gunfire, not once, but two more times to aid two Afghan women, one with a severe abdominal wound and who was near death.

Sergeant Keaton and his team were eventually able to load the victims on a casualty evacuation helicopter.



"Pararescue." Created by Ken Chandler. This image is 10x7.5 @ 300 ppi. Printable (PDF) files for this image, up to 18x24 inches @ 300 ppi, are available by contacting art.afnews.af.mil. These images are the property of Ken Chandler and are available only to members of the armed forces and military

While on the 30-minute flight back to base, he continued to administer trauma care to the victims despite the below-freezing temperatures.

To ensure his victims received immediate surgical care upon arrival, the pararescueman made contact with the hospital via the aircraft's communication system, sharing patient history and medical conditions.

Thanks to his efforts, all five of his patients survived. However, Sergeant Keaton refuses to take full credit for the lives he saved.

"It's a team effort," he said. "I couldn't have done it by myself. As a PJ, I only have two hands. My teammates helped out, holding things here and there.

"There's no doubt in my mind she would have died where she was if we hadn't been persistent and taken care of her," said Sergeant Keaton, referring to the woman with a gunshot wound in her abdomen.

For Sergeant Keaton, the experience was part of what he described as the "deployment of a lifetime."

"I was extremely busy," he said. "I was working with some of the best guys in the business. Unfortunately, things like this happen. Bad guys do bad things."

According to the award nomination, Sergeant Keaton's life-saving actions contributed directly to helping win the hearts and minds of the Afghan town, and coalition forces received valuable intelligence information from some of the victims' families.

Sergeant Keaton's professionalism and bravery come as no surprise to his fellow special operators.

"Sergeant Keaton is a special breed," said his supervisor. "He's a warrior who leads from the front and is focused on accomplishing the mission at any cost. In the face of extreme adversity and hostile conditions, he remained poised and calm, which ensured a successful outcome."

For the NCO who started his Air Force career in security forces, this is one mission that will "remain in my heart and my mind for a lifetime."

"I've got one mission in life," Sergeant Keaton said. "Wherever I go, I'm there to make sure people are treated and they make it home to their loved ones. If it means that I have to get into the heat of battle, that's what I'm going to do."

Sergeant Keaton will be honored at the AFSA Professional Airmen's Banquet in San Antonio Aug. 27. According to AFSA, he is the 37th Airman to receive the award and was chosen from 11 other Airmen nominated in 2008.