

Pilot awarded Kolligian Trophy for combat mission

5/10/2005 - **WASHINGTON (AFP)** -- Despite wounds and a helicopter crippled by enemy fire, an Air Force pilot safely flew his aircraft and crew home from Iraq.

For his efforts, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. John P. Jumper presented the Kolligian Trophy to Capt. Steven Edwards during a May 6 ceremony at the Pentagon.

Captain Edwards, currently assigned to the 20th Special Operations Squadron at Hurlburt Field, Fla., earned the air safety award as a result of the events that unfolded during the night of April 12, 2004, over northern Iraq.

The pilot is credited with saving the lives of eight crewmembers aboard his MH-53M Pave Low helicopter.

Captain Edwards served as flight lead of a two-ship formation during a night mission to resupply two combat units and retrieve the remains of a Soldier killed in action. During the mission, the aircraft struck by a rocket-propelled grenade.

The blast from the grenade destroyed the instrument panel, the center and the pilot's windscreens, and the overhead throttle control panel. Captain Edwards sustained injuries to the right side of his face and his right eye. He also suffered shrapnel wounds to both arms and both legs, as well as a dislocated right shoulder.

With loss of cockpit lighting, instruments and the automatic flight-control system, the captain had no means of judging his rate of descent, ground speed or altitude. Despite personal injury and the damaged aircraft, he safely landed it.

The difficulty and danger of this mission and of missions flown by all special operations pilots was recognized by General Jumper.

"The way they fly these helicopters is nothing less than amazing," he said. "Their missions are all tough and extremely dangerous. The skill required to do that rivals anything that anybody does with an airplane."

Captain Edwards first heard he had won the award when his preparations for a night training mission were interrupted with a phone call from his then-deployed commander.

"I went to answer the phone and he said, 'Steve, I want to congratulate you that you are the winner of the Koren Kolligian award,'" he said. "I said that's great, but what is it? I had never heard of it before. I asked him to spell it for me because I knew I'd have to look it up."

When he returned from his mission, Captain Edwards searched online to find out what he had won.

"That's how I found out a lot of information about the award," he said. "The Kolligian family, the tradition they have and a lot of individuals that received the award before me. That list of winners includes a lot of great individuals."

The Koren Kolligian Jr. Trophy is presented each year in the name and memory of an Air Force pilot, a first lieutenant, who was declared missing in the line of duty when his T-33 aircraft disappeared off the California coast Sept. 14, 1955.

The trophy was established to recognize outstanding feats of airmanship by aircrew members who by extraordinary skill, exceptional alertness, ingenuity or proficiency, averted accidents or minimized the seriousness of the accidents in terms of injury, loss of life, aircraft damage or property damage.

Captain Edwards credited his success on the mission to the expertise and training of his crew.

"If it hadn't been for the other guys aboard the aircraft that night, as well as the individuals of the other aircraft, there is a real good chance I wouldn't be standing here today," he said.

The trophy, established in 1958, is the only Air Force individual safety award personally presented by the Air Force chief of staff. Members of the Kolligian family attended the ceremony, as they do every year