

- This article can be found on page A1 of the May 15, 2002 Daily News.

Airmen earn MacKay Trophy

- The prestigious award is being given for a dangerous helicopter rescue in the mountains of Afghanistan last November.

By LINDSAY TOZER, Daily News Staff Writer

HURLBURT FIELD - Hollywood doesn't write 'em like this.

"I look down and we're maybe four feet off the ground and I'm hearing 'Power! Power! Power!' and I'm thinking, 'Holy crap, we're going to crash,' " said Staff Sgt. Paul, a pararescueman with the 23rd Special Tactics Squadron.

And he was on the rescue aircraft.

It was the kind of mission every special operator craves and every special operator fears: a helicopter rescue over the mountains of Afghanistan.

At night.

In a snowstorm.

Initially tapped to retrieve a critically ill soldier, the Hurlburt Field-assigned crew ended up saving one of their own. Their sister helicopter on the mission - also out of Hurlburt - crashed after losing radar in the storm.

For the November 2001 flight, the 20th Special Operations Squadron aircrew and special tactics members who made the rescue have earned the prestigious MacKay Trophy.

Their names will be etched into the award - given for the meritorious flight of the year - alongside such notables as Chuck Yeager (in 1947 for breaking the sound barrier) and another 20th SOS crew (in 1991 for the rescue of a downed Navy jet in Iraq).

The trophy will be presented in a ceremony this fall.

But Tuesday, those same men - lauded by 16th Special Operations Wing Commander Col. Lyle Koenig as "heroes in the truest sense of the word" - were stripped down to the basics. No Velcro name badges and tape over the nametags stitched into uniforms; no timelines; no specifics. Nothing that could compromise security.

House rules.

Master Sgt. Jeff squinted in the morning sunlight on a windswept Hurlburt flight line as he talked of Nov. 2, the snowy night he knew his crew was in trouble.

"The weather caught up with us," said the flight engineer on the downed helicopter. "We didn't have enough power to land and we didn't have enough power to climb. We had no options."

Only moments separated the MH-53 helicopter - call sign Knife 03 - from losing radar and the aircraft going down.

"That night we had no time to think," remembered Staff Sgt. Clint, a Knife 03 gunner. "It was like a quarter-second, we went into a turn and basically fell out of the sky."

Collecting in the dark outside the crashed aircraft, the crew secured the helicopter - classified information was removed and guns disabled - then inventoried the injuries.

"Everyone was standing and talking," Master Sgt. Jeff said. "That was a good sign."

Then, crewmembers holed up about a mile from the aircraft and waited in the below-freezing night.

Almost five hours would pass and the weather begin to clear, Master Sgt. Jeff said, before rescue could touch down.

"They were having the same trouble we were and with the weather and refueling," he said. "They were pushing the same envelope."

For Staff Sgt. Al, a gunner aboard the rescue helicopter - call sign Knife 04 - any trepidation had to be silenced.

"This time, it's like your brothers," he said. "You've got to get them out."

Once on the ground - an event one flight engineer likened to a "controlled crash itself" after blowing snow caused a whiteout - it was only minutes before the downed crew was onboard the rescue Pave Low.

Taking off, however, was another matter entirely.

"We nearly crashed again trying to get off the ground," Staff Sgt. Paul said. "We had no power."

The aircraft was airborne for a mile before Staff Sgt. Vince, a flight engineer on Knife 04, was confident it would stay in the sky.

"With all the factors working against us, our margin of error was pretty much nonexistent," he said.

After several air refuelings, the Pave Low landed at the crews' staging area more than 10 hours after first heading out in search of a sick soldier.

Despite no serious injuries and word that another unit had been able to pull the ailing warfighter out of Afghanistan, Master Sgt. Jeff hesitates to call the mission the best of the year.

"To basically hit the ground and walk away and have the crew come and pick us up and bring us home," he said, "I'd say this is the luckiest mission of my life."

• Lindsay Tozer can be reached at 863-1111, Ext. 443, or lindsayt@nwfdailynews.com