

PAVE LOW CREW EARNS MACKAY TROPHY

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HURLBURT FIELD, Fla. (Night Flyer News Service) -- An MH-53 Pave Low crew from the 20th Special Operations Squadron is this year's MacKay Trophy honoree.

The crew earned the trophy for a rescue mission involving another crew from the 20th SOS whose helicopter went down during Operation Enduring Freedom. The Air Force-level award is given annually to the Air Force member, crew or organization that makes the most meritorious flight of the year.

According to an official report, both helicopters were en-route to rescue a Special Operations member, Nov. 2 when the incident happened.

Both Pave Lows launched and within hours crossed into Afghanistan where the aircrews had to make a decision whether or not to continue, based on the bad weather they were encountering.

The terrain's altitude increased while weather conditions deteriorated, making the flight more dangerous. Because of the worsening conditions, the two helos began an orbit pattern while deciding whether to press on or turn back.

They decided to turn back, but while flying out of the poor weather the first helo --which had lost radar function -- lost visual contact with the second Pave Low. The last known radio transmission from the stranded aircraft was "Standby." Unbeknownst to the crew, their sister ship was on the ground.

The crew on the ground endured below freezing temperatures for almost five hours, said Staff Sgt. Clint, a gunner on the downed helicopter. Due to operational security reasons, the gunner's last name is not being released.

"There is an extreme surge of adrenaline associated with being on the ground behind enemy lines," said Capt. Frank, the pilot of downed Pave Low.

But the crew took comfort in knowing their sister ship was still in the area. "I knew if anyone could get us out it would be those guys," said Captain Frank, whose last name is not being released for security reasons.

The crew's survival, evasion, resistance and escape training kicked in, he added, but the urgency to get out of the freezing temperature increased because several of the crewmembers were injured.

Meanwhile, the airborne Pave Low coordinated with an airborne command and control asset to try to make radio contact with their squadron mates on the ground.

"My mind was running a million miles an hour," said Staff Sgt. Alberto, a gunner on the Pave Low circling the area. "(I was) reaching back to all my training, listening to my crew and radios, scanning for threats, looking for escape routes, thinking about evasive maneuvers, all at the same time. What kept repeating in my mind was 'We are not going to leave our brothers!'"

The crew made several attempts to reach the downed MH-53, each time pushed back because of weather. "The snow clouds blanketed the rugged mountains and valleys," said Sergeant Alberto. "After several hours of trying to penetrate the weather, the clouds opened up. It was weird --like Moses parting the Red Sea."

Landing at the site of the downed helicopter became dangerous as blowing snow caused the crew to lose visibility.

"Outstanding crew coordination and timely inputs from the scanners allowed (them) to land safely," said Lt. Col. Michael Kingsley, 20th SOS commander.

With the downed crew now on board their sister helo, the relief set in. "When we got back in the sky I couldn't stop feeling a burst of happiness," said Sergeant Alberto.

Because of the altitude and the extra weight, the Pave Low wasn't able to climb more than a few feet off the ground.

"The engines were screaming at maximum power," said 1st Lt. Mike, pilot of rescue Pave Low. "That was the most tense part of the flight, but the crew was outstanding."

Lieutenant Mike and his crew traded altitude for airspeed when the terrain began to slope. That trade gave them enough power to feel sure they could continue to fly, said the pilot.

With only about 35 minutes of fuel remaining, the crew called in for an aerial refueling. The refueling was risky because they had so little power that they couldn't take on much fuel. It would take several partial aerial refuelings before the helo would make it to a site to unload the wounded passengers.

"The crewmembers are heroes to me and my crew," said Captain Frank. The rescue was a team effort, said the lieutenant.

"The support we had when things were going badly is incredible," said Lieutenant Mike. "First, there was the 8th SOS with their 'Johnny on the Spot' aerial refueling. Then there were other assets relaying radio messages. Finally, I can't say enough about (the downed crew) and how they kept cool heads. They developed a plan and greatly improved their chances of rescue. Even though this rescue seemed impossible, they're the ones who made it happen."