

# *Terror in Afghanistan*

*by Frederick Wickert*



On April 6, 2008 an air assault began in a high mountain valley of Afghanistan. The assault group, consisting of 40 U.S. Special Forces and 100 Afghanistan Commandos were flown into the valley ridges by helicopter. The group expected to find about 70 insurgents.

Within ten minutes of their landing on the valley ridges, a force of more than 200 Taliban ambushed them, raining heavy fire from only 50 meters away. Snow on the ground, jagged rocks, a cliff and a fast moving river was the environment they were trapped in.

Caught off guard, half of the American troops were wounded, but all survived. Two of the Afghanistan Commandos were killed. There were two JTAC's (Joint Terminal Air Controller), in the group of American Special Forces. Air Force Staff Sgt. Rob Gutierrez and Air Force Staff Sgt. Zachary Rhyner.

During the first 15 minutes of the fight, Sgt. Rhyner who was pulling security was wounded. The bullet passed through his left thigh and then into the foot of another man. Three others were also wounded. Sgt. Rhyner, though he was wounded, grabbed the three other wounded men to take them to cover, but there was nowhere to go. They were trapped.

Sgt. Rhyner moved the other wounded men down the cliff to safety, while at the same time, firing his weapon for cover and calling in air strikes.

By the end of the battle, Sgt Rhyner had called in 4,570 rounds of cannon fire, 9 Hellfire missiles, 162 rockets, a dozen 500 lb bombs and one 2,000 lb bomb, all while firing his M-14 rifle to protect his team.

Sgt. Gutierrez was later heard to say, "If it wasn't for Zach, I wouldn't be here."

On March 10th, 2009 Air Force Staff Sergeant Zachary Rhyner will be awarded the Air Force Cross at a ceremony at the Pentagon, for his acts of heroism that day. The Air Force Cross is the second highest honor that can be given by the Air Force. It will be only the third Air Force Cross awarded since 2001.

The other two were awarded posthumously to Senior Airman Jason D. Cunningham, a para-rescue man, and to Technical Sergeant John Chapman, a combat controller. Both men died in Afghanistan during the battle for Roberts Ridge in Afghanistan in 2002.

In WWII and in the Korean War, newspapers and magazines frequently heralded such heroism. Motion pictures were made about such hero's and about such battles. Now, sadly and regrettably, we now only read or hear about the few who dishonor the military with escapades such as went on at Abugrahab prison in Iraq, and made up stories about prisoner abuse in Guantamano that turned out to be manufactured and untrue. The only time we seem to hear or read about a hero any more is if the man was a sports hero, and especially if he was killed accidentally by friendly fire.

Of course if a journalist instead of one of the troops gets killed or wounded, we will be sure to learn about it. I guess our real hero's these days are required to be quiet heroes as if someone might be offended by hearing about them. To me that is strange and weird logic, but it seems to be the world we live in.

(For another story of JTAC heroism, see *The Trials of Israel Del Torro*.)