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June 5, 2002

Helicopter Crew Garners Mackay Trophy

The saving logic of redundancy proved itself in dramatic fashion last November when the crew of an Air Force helicopter rescued the crew of a sister ship under extremely hazardous weather conditions behind enemy lines in Afghanistan—a feat that has earned the rescue team the National Aeronautic Association’s Clarence Mackay Trophy for the year 2001.

“This is an incredible story of courage, dedication, skill, and teamwork that demonstrates the difficult circumstances faced by our military personnel in Afghanistan,” said Don Koranda, President of the NAA. “Flying under these conditions takes extraordinary dedication to the mission, something the crew of Knife 04 amply demonstrated.”

The two aircraft involved in the incident—both Sikorsky MH-53M Pave Low heavy-lift helicopters attached to the 20th Special Operations Squadron—were dispatched on the evening of November 2, 2001, from a staging base to rescue a soldier in Afghanistan requiring urgent medical attention. The lead aircraft was codenamed Knife 03, the second ship was codenamed Knife 04. Two aircraft were assigned to the mission so that one could serve as a backup for the other—a precaution that would prove prophetic in this case.

As the two helicopters moved over Afghanistan’s rugged terrain, weather conditions began to deteriorate. When Knife 03’s radar malfunctioned, Knife 04 assumed the lead position and was able to scout out a passage through the mountains. But heavy snow started to close in behind the formation, prompting Knife 04 to attempt a turnaround. When this proved impossible, the two aircraft, barely able to maintain visual contact with each other, were forced to fly at approximately 200 feet off the ground to navigate through the mountain passes. After traveling only a few miles under these conditions, the two helicopters lost visual contact, and Knife 04 executed a circling maneuver over a dry lakebed while trying to regain sight of her sister ship. During the maneuver, Knife 03 radioed to Knife 04 for help, then broke off transmission. Unbeknown to Knife 04, Knife 03 had crashed in the mountains at an altitude of approximately 10,000 feet.

The crew aboard Knife 03, all still alive, were able to escape the helicopter and take up a position on the ground, but the cold, the darkness, the bad weather, and their own injuries put them at immediate risk. Knife 04 spent the next hour trying to find the downed aircraft, but even with help from an airborne command post, which had located the crash site, Knife 04 could not penetrate the severe weather in the region.

Running low on fuel, Knife 04 departed the area temporarily to conduct a hastily arranged aerial refueling, then returned to the vicinity of the crash, which was now clear of the worst weather. On the return leg, the crew of Knife 04 realized that as soon as they located the crash, they would be taking on the additional weight of another crew, creating the ironic necessity of dumping most of the fuel they had just acquired to make sure
they had enough lifting capacity at the high altitude of the crash site. According to their calculations, they
would have only a few minutes of flight time left, after dumping fuel, to rescue the downed crew.

Spotting the crash site, Knife 04 moved to a nearby position to dump the fuel, then descended to a landing
that was momentarily threatened by a blinding cloud of snow created by the helicopter’s rotor blades. After
loading the survivors from Knife 03, the crew of Knife 04 faced yet another crisis: even at full power, the
helicopter could barely clear the ground. Rotor speed dropped and the aircraft began to shake. Carefully
nursing his machine, the Pave Low’s pilot nosed the aircraft forward until he found a break in the terrain that
enabled him to descend to lower ground where the air was denser. Thus able to trade altitude for airspeed, he
took the helicopter up for another in-flight refueling (with a C-130 tanker called in for that purpose), only to
discover that he could not maintain altitude if he continued to take on fuel. The two aircraft (tanker and
helicopter) then flew in formation to a lower altitude where they could complete the refueling. All the while,
even though it was still nighttime, both aircraft were vulnerable to detection by the enemy, including detection
by villagers on the ground. They were able to safely elude the enemy by flying still lower so they could use the
terrain to mask their departure route.

After dropping the downed flyers at medical facilities, Knife 04 refueled once again in the air (the fourth
unplanned refueling of the mission) and continued homeward, arriving at its staging base at daybreak, some
ten hours after originally taking off. Due to fog and smoke at the base, the actual landing required another
half-hour, during which the exhausted helicopter crew had to risk small-arms fire from the ground by climbing
above the weather to assess the situation. The crew had been awake since approximately noon the previous
day.

In awarding the Mackay Trophy for 2001 to the crew of Knife 04, the National Aeronautic Association and the
Air Force said the crew "distinguished themselves by extraordinary acts of valor and heroism."

The men of Knife 04 were (last names withheld for security reasons):

1. First Lieutenant Mike, pilot
2. Captain Jay, copilot
3. Staff Sergeant Chad, flight engineer
4. Staff Sergeant Vincent, flight engineer
5. Staff Sergeant Mark, aerial gunner
6. Staff Sergeant Alberto, aerial gunner
7. Staff Sergeant Paul, pararescueman
8. Staff Sergeant Bill, combat controller
9. Senior Airman Jason, pararescueman

The Sikorsky Pave Low is the largest and most powerful helicopter in the Air Force inventory. It is designed for
low-level, long-range operations in adverse weather, day or night.

This is not the first time the crew of a Pave Low has won the Mackay Trophy. A crew flying the original model of
the aircraft (the MH-53J) won the award for 1991 for rescuing a Navy pilot in Iraq.

The Mackay Trophy is presented annually by the NAA, in conjunction with the Air Force, for the "most
meritorious flight of the year by an Air Force person, persons, or organization." The winner is chosen for
displaying "gallantry, intrepidity, unusual initiative, resourcefulness, and unusual presence of mind under
combat or non-combat conditions.