GRIM 31 awarded 2002 Mackay Trophy

Arlington, VA - An Air Force unit known by its "Grim 31" call sign proved anything but grim last year for 82 U.S. Army soldiers--28 of whom were injured--trapped in a rugged valley in Afghanistan by Taliban and Al-Qaeda forces.

All of the soldiers were rescued from what seemed certain death, thanks to the 14-man crew of an Air Force AC-130 Spectre gunship, designated Grim 31, that engaged the enemy from overhead during a two-hour, night-time operation that permitted two Black Hawk helicopters to land and pick up the battered troops.

For their heroic efforts, the 14 crewmen have been chosen to receive the National Aeronautic Association's Clarence Mackay Trophy for 2002. The award, administered jointly by the National Aeronautic Association (NAA) and the United States Air Force, is presented annually for the most meritorious flight of the year; also for gallantry, intrepidity, unusual initiative and resourcefulness, achievement of outstanding results with unusual presence of mind in either combat or non-combat conditions.

The Spectre team is part of the Air Force's 16th Special Operations Squadron, based at Hurlburt Field in Florida. At the time of the incident, which took place on March 2, 2002, the team was on duty near Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Late in the afternoon, Grim 31 was dispatched to escort the two Black Hawks into Afghanistan to extract the Army soldiers from the valley where they had been under attack since dawn after their original mission had to be aborted. According to the Air Force, "the firing was so intense, there was no way to evacuate the wounded during daylight hours."

Arriving at the scene after dark, Grim 31 used infrared equipment and other nocturnal devices to help locate enemy positions in the surrounding mountains and knock them out. Their task was complicated by the enemy's ability to take cover in caves when an aircraft approached, betrayed by its own noise. The AC-130 crew also experienced...
technical problems, including a malfunctioning gun. At all times, the Air Force reports, "Grim 31 was well within range of all enemy anti-aircraft defenses."

The crew's skill in spotting enemy troops on the ground and suppressing their activities before they could inflict further damage on U.S. personnel was the decisive factor in setting up the rescue, according to the Air Force. When the two helicopters arrived at the site and began the process of evacuation, Grim 31 was able to neutralize one enemy group that emerged from a cave and started firing on the lead craft. The Spectre crew then "continued to lay down suppressive fire on the ridgeline that surrounded the friendly position, keeping other prospective enemy in the caves and unable to join the fight."

One of the Americans caught in the valley was a sergeant who had survived the "Black Hawk Down" debacle in Somalia in 1993. He described his ordeal in Afghanistan as "worse than Mogadishu."

"At the end of the two-hour engagement," the Air Force says, "Grim 31 had destroyed all enemy machine gun, mortar, and rocket-propelled grenade positions," saving the helicopters from potential destruction and delivering an entire company of Army soldiers from enemy entrapment.

For their distinguished service in combat, NAA will present the 14 members of Grim 31 with the Mackay Trophy at the Association's Fall Awards Banquet later this year.

NAA is a non-profit, membership organization devoted to fostering opportunities to participate fully in aviation activities and to promoting public understanding of the importance of aviation and space flight to the United States. For more information on NAA and its award and recognition program visit us on line at www.naa-usa.org.

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