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Combat Controller Receives Posthumous Honor

The Air Force posthumously awarded the Air Force Cross to TSgt. John Chapman, a combat controller assigned to the 24th Special Tactics Squadron, Pope AFB, N.C. The award ceremony took place at Pope on Jan. 10. Chapman was killed in Afghanistan on March 4, 2002, during a firefight with al Qaeda and Taliban forces as he helped save the lives of his team.

The Air Force Cross is USAF's highest award for valor and, overall, is second only to the Medal of Honor, which Congress must approve.

Chapman was one of two Air Force members killed during Operation Anaconda. The other, SrA. Jason D. Cunningham, a pararescue jumper with the 38th Rescue Squadron, Moody AFB, Ga., also received an Air Force Cross posthumously at a ceremony last fall. (See "Aerospace World: Air Force Posthumously Honors Pararescueman," October 2002, p. 11.)

As an Army helicopter inserted Chapman and his teammates into Afghanistan in the early hours of Anaconda, it came under heavy machine gun fire. It was directly hit by a rocket-propelled grenade, which caused one member, Navy SEAL Petty Officer 1st Class Neil C. Roberts, to fall from the aircraft. The helicopter was severely damaged, and the pilot made an emergency landing about four miles from where Roberts fell.

Chapman called in an AC-130 gunship to provide close air support and cover the stranded team, then directed the gunship to search for Roberts. Next, Chapman called for an evacuation helicopter. He volunteered to rescue Roberts and engaged and killed two enemy personnel in the attempt.

The award citation said the following: "He continued to advance, reaching the enemy position, then engaged a second enemy position, a dug-in machine gun nest. At this time the rescue team came under effective enemy fire from three directions. From close range Sergeant Chapman exchanged fire with the enemy from minimum personal cover until he succumbed to multiple wounds."

The citation continued: "His engagement and destruction of the first enemy position and advancement on the second enemy position enabled his team to move to cover and break enemy contact."

Air Force Secretary James G. Roche said at the ceremony that Chapman was an "American's American."

Chapman left the University of Connecticut to join the Air Force in 1985. He first

served in the information systems field, then, in 1989, began combat controller training at Lackland AFB, Tex. At Pope, Chapman was known for his skill as a radio communicator, aircraft landing zone controller, combat search and rescue specialist, air traffic controller, free-fall parachutist, and military scuba-diving instructor.

Gen. John P. Jumper, Chief of Staff, presented the Air Force Cross to Chapman's widow, Valerie, and to his parents, Terry Giaccone and Gene Chapman.