

Wounded NCO's will to fly remains undaunted

by Linda D. Kozaryn
American Forces Press Service

6/29/2007 - **WASHINGTON (AFPN)** -- An Andrews Air Force Base Airman remains committed to the Air Force and his love of flying even after being shot down over Iraq and nearly losing an eye.

Life was good for Tech Sgt. Christian MacKenzie for nearly 10 years as he served in his dream job as a special operations flight engineer aboard an MH-53 Pave Low helicopter.

Since his boyhood in New England, Sergeant MacKenzie had always wanted to fly. He had planned to join the military after high school, but love led him to his future wife, Jennifer. She and his baby daughter changed his plans.

Knowing he still longed for the open sky, Mrs. MacKenzie encouraged him to reach for his boyhood dream. In 1991, he earned his wings with the Air Force.

"I guess deep down inside, I just wanted to do something for my country," he said. "I wanted to make a difference. There's more to the world than just hanging around home, and I knew that the only way I could fly was in the service of my country."

After graduating as a flight engineer in 1994, he flew low-level, long-range, undetected flights into enemy territory, day or night, in all kinds of weather, to insert, extract and resupply special operations forces. Sergeant MacKenzie flew missions in South Korea, Bosnia and Croatia, and took part in exercises in Qatar and Bahrain. He flew combat missions over Kosovo during Operation Allied Force and over the southern Iraq no-fly zone during Operation Southern Watch.

"Being a Pave Low flight engineer was the best job I ever worked my tail off for," he said.

The 38-year-old NCO officer racked up 2,300 hours of flight time, including 500 hours in combat. He served in a combat zone every year since 1996.

"You didn't see us in the news," he said. "There were no parades or big flag-waving ceremonies or anything like that. We went in. We did our job. We did what our country needed us to do.

"You could see the smiles on the guys' faces. We never knew their names. We pulled them out and they went about their business," he said. "At the end of the day, that's what it was all about. Without somebody patting you on the back, taking your picture or shaking your hand, the job itself rewarded you for doing those kinds of missions."

Rough flying in Afghanistan and Iraq

When duty with the 20th Special Operations Squadron called Sergeant MacKenzie to Afghanistan, he said



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Then-Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. John Jumper visits Tech. Sgt. Christian MacKenzie at Wilford Hall Medical Center in 2004 at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. Sergeant MacKenzie, who served as a special operations MH-53 Pave Low flight engineer, was shot down April 13, 2004, in Fallujah, Iraq. (U.S. Air Force photo)

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the country's rough terrain presented some major challenges.

"It was the toughest flying I ever did," he said. "You were flying at the aerodynamic edge of your aircraft in a way that there was no room for error."

The crew had to calculate fuel and the weight of people on board, he said, along with the distances, altitudes, the harsh terrain, unpredictable winds and the number of people they had to take in. On some missions, the MH-53, which burns 3,000 pounds of fuel an hour, would get down to 300 to 400 pounds of fuel.

"It was down to the wire," he said. "We would actually go up to altitude to dump off fuel to trim our weight down to get in, and then we'd get down there and the sand dunes would have moved or the (landing zone) would have changed. We'd only have enough gas to make one, maybe two attempts at it.

"We really didn't have a lot of options," he said. "Our noise signature and the people we were working with, everything had to be on time, on target. There was not a lot of room for error."

Because they flew at night, he said, people often shot at the noise even though they couldn't see the helicopter.

"One night, a team of 11 guys had been compromised in Afghanistan. By the time we launched, it had been an hour and a half since anybody had talked to them. We were going on their last set of coordinates. By the time two ships got in there, pulled them out and got back home, we'd been engaged by enemy fire 23 different times."

In 2003, Sergeant MacKenzie deployed to Kuwait, where he began flying mainly resupply missions into Iraq. Daylight flights, heat and sandstorms became part of his routine.

"We'd go out for a six- to eight-hour mission and practically have to get an IV bag to get rehydrated when we got back, even when we were drinking water the whole time," he said. "The temperature would be around 120 to 130, and we'd be loading cargo, bringing supplies and equipment."

From Kuwait, Sergeant MacKenzie's next rotation took him into Iraq, which had become increasingly more dangerous. During one mission from Baghdad to Fallujah, fate delivered a nearly fatal blow that changed the course of Sergeant MacKenzie's life.

Entering the Fallujah hot zone

On April 13, 2004, Sergeant MacKenzie's MH-53 went on a night mission to deliver supplies to a team in Fallujah, a desert city crawling with armed insurgents.

"U.S. Marines were moving in," he said. "People were getting beheaded. You did not stop there. Either you flew around Fallujah or you flew across in certain areas. It was in and out. There was no messing around. There were rockets. There were so many enemies that just wanted to shoot anything in the air."

From Fallujah, they were to pick up the remains of a team sergeant major who had been killed in Mahmadiyah, a town south of Baghdad. Sergeant MacKenzie's MH-53; however, never made it that far.

"We were about 180 feet off the ground, when an insurgent stood up about 300 feet in front of us and fired an (rocket-propelled grenade) straight into the nose of the helicopter," he said. "It blew about a four-foot hole in the helicopter. It hit right in front of me."

Sergeant MacKenzie was looking down working the navigation system when the rocket came in.

"It broke my face in three places and tore my eyeball apart," Sergeant MacKenzie said. "I had flash burns from the explosion, shrapnel all up and down my arms and superficial burns. I couldn't hear. I couldn't see. I had no sense of touch, no sense of smell."

Capt. Tom Lessner, the co-pilot on his right, lost control of the helicopter.

"It blew his helmet off his head," Sergeant MacKenzie said. "He lost his night-vision goggles. It peeled the roof back over our head, so we had no throttles, no way of controlling the engines.

"After we got hit, a second RPG went right between us and the second helicopter behind us," he said. "They said we went 80 degrees nose up and then started falling out of the sky."

Capt. Steve Edwards, the pilot on Sergeant MacKenzie's left, with wounds to his arm, the side of his face and his leg, "was able to maintain his night vision goggles and regain control of the helicopter," he said.

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On the ground, with about 45 insurgents in the field, a second MH-53 came in to rescue the downed aircrew.

Sergeant MacKenzie was rushed to a nearby medical unit in Baghdad before being flown to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany.

"When they took off the bandages a day and a half later, I had 20-400 vision, blood in my eyes and corneal abrasions," he said.

"I talked to my wife when I was on the table in the recovery room from Baghdad, and I apologized to her, because I was more concerned about what she was going through at that moment than me. I was just happy to be alive," he said.

From Landstuhl, Sergeant MacKenzie moved to Wilford Hall Medical Center at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas.

"This is where the battles began to become real. I was trying to save my bad eye, trying to save my face," he said. "My goal was to fly again."

For most career Airmen, losing the vision in an eye signals the end of military service. Though Sergeant MacKenzie's eye was damaged, he was determined to fly again.

Sergeant MacKenzie learned quickly that to recover from the serious battle wounds, he would have to overcome physical and mental anguish.

"Every day, when you go through something like that, you have to make a decision, 'Do I get out of bed or do I just stay here?'" he said. "I'd wake up and think, 'I'm in pain. Things hurt. I didn't sleep well. I can't sleep the way I want to. I can't do the things I want to. I can't even pick up more than a half gallon of milk. What am I doing? I'm never going to fly again.' All that negative stuff runs through your head."

However, every day he got up knowing that was the first step to getting back to the life he loved. He told himself, "OK, I'm all jacked up, but I'm alive, so the rest is trivial."

His will to fly again remained undaunted throughout his recovery.

"Pretty much everybody said, 'No way,'" he said. "From the beginning they said, 'Your left eye is too damaged. We really need to just remove it. I said, 'No, you don't. Work at fixing it and if it fails after all you can do, then I'll let you take it out.'"

The doctors went to work, performing seven surgeries on his eyes and two surgeries on his face.

"Right now, I can see lights and shadows," Sergeant MacKenzie said. "They finally got my retina to stay attached and maintain its own pressure. I can see movement. It's still my eye. I can see perfectly with my other eye."

In July 2005, a medical board approved Sergeant MacKenzie's request to remain on active duty. In August, he was returned to flying status and reassigned to Andrews AFB to work as a flight attendant, quite different from being a special operations flight engineer flying clandestine chopper missions.

Nevertheless, Sergeant MacKenzie said he doesn't mind.

"That was just a phase of life. In an instant, it was over," he said. "I don't compare this job to my last job. They're two completely different worlds. This is a new phase and I still get to fly.

"I think I'm the only 'one-eyed' flying guy in the Air Force," he said with a smile.

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