

Airborne NCO awarded Silver Star Medal for heroism in Afghanistan

By Rick Scavetta
U.S. Army Africa

Hundreds of maroon-bereted Soldiers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team gathered Nov. 30, 2009 to honor Staff Sgt. Matthew Matlock from Company C, 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, for actions he took under fire to save Soldiers in Afghanistan.

Paratroopers stood at attention at the post theater at Caserma Ederle, Vicenza, Italy, as Maj. Gen. William B. Garrett III, commander of U.S. Army Africa, fastened the Silver Star to Matlock's uniform.

During the ceremony, Matlock's thoughts turned to the Soldiers who were with him that day and what they endured, he said.

"They were wounded and couldn't fight back. I was going to make sure they made it out of there," Matlock said. "They would have done it for me, so I did it for them."

He says a day seldom passes when Matlock doesn't think about when his convoy was moving through Zerok in Afghanistan's Paktika province June 20, 2008.

"We were on our way back to Orgun-E from our last mission. We were getting ready to go home," he said.

Just a few miles from its destination, the patrol drove into enemy fighters who attacked Matlock's patrol with small arms and rocket-propelled grenades.

"Everything broke loose. We kept trying to push through, but they targeted our truck with RPGs and disabled it," Matlock said. "They just kept hitting us, until finally the truck caught on fire, and I had to get everybody out of there."

An RPG struck an external fuel tank, sending flames and shrapnel inside, seriously wounding three Soldiers from Matlock's squad. Under direct fire and wounded himself, Matlock evacuated his injured comrades and treated them with first aid. He fired back and directed his squad to shoot at enemy positions.

But RPGs poured in, sending hot metal fragments through



Photo by Barbara Romano

Maj. Gen. William B. Garrett III, commander of U.S. Army Africa, attaches the Silver Star to Staff Sgt. Matthew Matlock's uniform.

the air. Each time, Matlock used his body to shield fellow Soldiers, receiving shrapnel wounds in the process.

"That's where training pays off, allowing instincts to take over," Matlock said. "You don't really think about anything else except getting your guys out of there. That was all that was going through my head – these guys are going to make it home. I made sure of that," Matlock said.

Eighteen months had passed since that day in Afghanistan when Matlock listened on as Garrett spoke of his actions.

"Staff Sgt. Matlock fought with such incredible bravery, deliberately putting himself at risk time and time again to save the lives of his men," Garrett said. "He stepped forward without hesitation and did everything we expect of a seasoned combat leader of any rank."

Matlock, 26, followed in the footsteps of his father, William Matlock, a retired U.S. Army Special Forces master sergeant. In 2002, the young Matlock joined the infantry and underwent airborne training before joining 1-503rd, the battalion known as "First Rock," where he served in the scout platoon sniper section. In March 2003, Matlock served a yearlong tour in Iraq. In 2005, he served a year in Afghanistan. Afterward, Matlock joined Company C, 1-503rd, rising from team leader to squad leader. In 2007, Matlock deployed again to Afghanistan. It was during that second Afghanistan tour when his actions merited the Silver Star, given only for valor and gallantry in combat.

Matlock currently serves as a weapons squad leader with Company C. He returned to Afghanistan with his unit in December 2009. He's said he is inspired by young volunteers filling the ranks, "ready to learn and ready to fight," still knowing they will be sent into

harm's way.

