

NCO awarded Silver Star for courage under fire in Afghanistan

By Capt. Joseph Sanfilippo
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Combat united them two years ago. Camaraderie united them once more.

Soldiers from the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment came together to honor one of their own for his courage, leadership and quick thinking while under fire in Afghanistan.

Staff Sgt. Conrad Begaye stood humbly as a Silver Star was fastened to his uniform during a ceremony June 30, 2009, at Caserma Ederle's Hoekstra Field in Vicenza, Italy. The medal was awarded in recognition for his valor during an enemy ambush Nov. 9, 2007, in the Nuristan province.

"There are people who have passed on who deserve this," Begaye said. "There were five men who died. I'll accept and wear it in honor of them, not for my actions, but for theirs."

Begaye said he would have preferred a handshake or a pat on the back, because infantrymen don't fight for medals but for each other. That is why he felt grateful to have his fellow Soldiers behind him during the ceremony.

"What happened there is something I think about every day," Begaye said. "It's not easy to forget."

That day, Begaye's unit, also known as the "Chosen company," had just met with local Afghan leaders. The company, along with the platoon's headquarters sections and a squad of Afghan National Army soldiers, were hiking eastward on a small path in rugged terrain when they were sprayed with bullets.

Begaye, who received a gunshot wound to the arm, was pinned down but managed to return fire. He then told his troops to follow him down a rocky slope to find cover. Keeping composed and ignoring his injury, Begaye directed and encouraged the Soldiers to safety.

One of those Soldiers was a paratrooper who had been shot in both legs and was still taking fire. Knowing the enemy would shift their target away if they thought the Soldier was dead, Begaye told the paratrooper to play dead. The move likely helped save the Soldier's life.

Begaye then moved another wounded Soldier to a nearby cave to protect him from the hail of bullets.

Using a radio, Begaye called his higher headquarters and directed mortar fire onto enemy positions, which essentially ended the battle. He then motivated a Soldier to organize a defensive perimeter of Afghan Soldiers to prevent their unit from being harassed or overrun.

Two years later, most of the Soldiers in that ambush were standing behind Begaye at the ceremony. U.S. Army Africa commander Maj. Gen. William B. Garrett III told the audience Begaye's devotion to his fellow Soldiers was amazing.

"Today, we honor a noncommissioned officer whose bold actions turned the tide of battle and saved the day. ... [His] courage under fire and fierce loyalty to his men still astounds us all," Garrett said. "Outnumbered, wounded and initially pinned down in the kill zone of the enemy ambush, he didn't hesitate to leap forward – literally – and take charge of the fight."

Garrett also talked about the Warrior Ethos, ideas that guide Soldiers. The Warrior Ethos states that a Soldier should place the mission first, never accept defeat, never quit and never leave a fallen comrade.

"These are just words to some people. But the Warrior Ethos is a way of life to Staff

Sgt. Begaye," Garrett said. "Amazing acts of bravery and valor were commonplace that grim day. But this morning, we recognize Staff Sgt. Begaye for his courage. We are thankful for the opportunity to serve with such a man."

Begaye, a Navajo from Black Canyon, Ariz., enlisted in the infantry 10 years ago. He was an airborne ranger when he was sent to Vicenza in 2003. Before his tour to Nuristan province in 2007, he had deployed to Iraq in 2003 and Afghanistan in 2005.

Begaye hopes his story will help younger Soldiers understand the importance of training, leadership and motivation. He said he wants his story to convey the reality of war to troops eager to experience combat.

"It should open their eyes. A firefight is a life-altering experience, one that I'm still living through," Begaye said. "Soldiers should understand ... this is real life, and people do die."



Photo by Joseph Sanfilippo

Staff Sgt. Conrad Begaye stands before rows of fellow Soldiers from 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, during a ceremony on June 30, 2009. Begaye was awarded the Silver Star for his valorous actions during an enemy ambush Nov. 9, 2007, in the Nuristan province of Afghanistan.