

Army Reservist receives Silver Star for heroism in Afghanistan

By Donna Miles
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Sgt. Gregory S. Ruske is quick to call himself an ordinary Soldier, but he has already been distinguished as one of the Army's heroes in the war in Afghanistan.

In October 2008, the Army reservist met Army Reserve officials, attended the Association of the U.S. Army's annual meeting in Washington, D.C., and was presented with a Silver Star. He told the officials he didn't see the actions he took when his platoon was attacked by a much larger Taliban force as anything exceptional.

"I don't consider myself a hero," he said. "I was just an ordinary guy put in an extraordinary situation. I reacted based on my upbringing, training and compassion; and thankfully, it worked out in the end."

On April 21, 2008, Ruske was assigned to Combined Joint Task Force 101, operating in Afghanistan's Kapisa province, when the incident that led to his award took place. He and his fellow Soldiers from 3rd Platoon, A Company, Task Force Gladiator, were on a patrol in a remote area not accessible by vehicle when Taliban operatives attacked them with heavy grenades, machine guns and rifle fire.

"There was no way our gun truck support could get to us, so we were kind of out (there) by ourselves when all Hades broke loose," he said.

Trapped with his unit in an exposed position, Ruske returned fire so most of the platoon could move to protective cover. Ruske then moved to a rooftop and continued laying fire even after taking a bullet to the hip.

At that point, Ruske realized that two Afghan National Police officers were still pinned down in the open, taking fire from Taliban attackers. One ran for cover, but the other officer – the one Ruske had worked with at vehicle checkpoints and chatted with through an interpreter – had been shot and was trying to crawl to safety through a hail of bullets.

"Seeing that dirt kick up no more than six inches from his head, I said, 'Man, this is jacked up,'" Ruske recalled thinking. "They are still shooting at this guy. He is still bleeding and shot. And I said, 'We have to go get him.'"

Ruske said he didn't take time to think about his own safety, but simply reacted to the training he learned to prepare him for combat.

Ruske credited his mentor, Sgt. 1st Class Glen Boucher, with

instilling the discipline and skills he drew while under fire.

"He was fair, but if you stepped across that line, he would check you, and that was good," Ruske said of his former squad leader, then a Bradley infantry fighting vehicle commander. "He could joke with you and mess around with you, but when it came down to work, it was time to work."

A stickler for soldiering skills, Boucher taught Ruske tactics he said enabled him to assist the fallen Afghan police officer.

"He's the one who taught me all the ins and outs of dismounted and mounted techniques, and actually it was the 'Z' pattern he taught me that I had my [squad automatic weapon] gunner do to suppress [enemy fire] and buy us a little time when they were shooting at us," Ruske said.

Ruske ordered his SAW gunner, Spc. Walter Reed, to spray the enemy in a Z-shaped pattern, expending a whole box of 200 rounds to give Ruske and his buddy, Spc. Eric Seagraves, time to run out to retrieve the officer.

The two dodged bullets as they grabbed the Afghan police officer's arms and dragged him toward a wall that provided protective covering.

Only when Ruske and Seagraves went to lift the man behind the wall did they realize that Ruske's leg had been shattered.

Later that day, after Ruske was taken to Bagram Air Base to receive treatment for his gunshot wound, he checked on the Afghan officer and

was relieved to see that he had survived and would keep both legs.

Almost six months later, Ruske said he finds it amazing that he received a Silver Star for his actions. "I still don't really believe it," he said. Ruske deflected attention from himself, emphasizing that he acted as part of a team.

"I had help the whole time. It's not like it was just me," he said. "None of it would have been possible without Reed with the SAW and Seagraves helping me with the guy. It was the one plan that turned out all right."

Ruske is a juvenile corrections officer in Denver. After returning to his assignment, Ruske said he hoped to be like the combat veterans in the Army Reserve who helped him get ready to deploy by sharing what they learned about roadside bombs, search techniques and other combat techniques.

"I picked their brains, and they passed their experience and lessons learned to me," Ruske said. "Now that I'm back, it's my turn to pass on my knowledge and experience to some of the newer guys, just like the other guys did for me."



Courtesy photo

Sgt. Gregory S. Ruske was the fourth Army Reservist to receive the Silver Star for heroism demonstrated after he and his fellow Soldiers were ambushed in Afghanistan's Kapisa province April 21, 2008.