

# Paratrooper awarded Army's second-highest award for valor

By Sgt. Neil W. McCabe  
XVIII Airborne Corps

Surrounded by civic leaders, comrades, veterans and relatives, and more than three years after his heroics in Afghanistan's Hindu Kush mountains, a Mooresville, N.C., paratrooper was presented in a ceremony at Fort Bragg, N.C., Jan. 22 with the Distinguished Service Cross, the nation's second-highest award for valor.

"Many talk about being in the company of heroes. Today, we are truly in their company, and today we celebrate and recognize one of our very best, Staff Sgt. James M. Takes," said Col. William Ostlund, who commanded Takes' battalion, the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team, during that deployment in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Standing with Ostlund, Maj. Gen. Rodney O. Anderson, the commanding general of Task Force Bragg, pinned the medal on Takes.

"This is a big deal. This is a really big deal. So let me just say: All the way, Army strong, America strong," said Anderson, who, as the 82nd Airborne Division's deputy commanding general for support, deployed as the command group for Joint Task Force-82 in Afghanistan.

"I remember the majority of it, and I am glad I do. It was the pivotal moment in my life," Takes said. "Some people might want to put it away and get rid of it and put those feelings and those memories behind them.

"I embrace those moments; they changed my life," Takes added. "When you think about the guys who paid the sacrifice that day, I don't want to forget them or their memories or their actions or anything that they had done. They are my people, and I don't want to forget any part of them."

Maj. Matthew R. Myers, who was Takes' commander, said the attack came Nov. 9, 2007, as the 30-soldier column, which included a squad of soldiers of the Afghanistan National army, moved on foot from a key leader engagement in the village of Aranas.

"They were returning from that mission after they had stayed at the village overnight," Myers said. The troopers traveled by foot because the area was inaccessible to vehicles.

Myers, who was also awarded the Silver Star, said he was in

the company command post at Camp Blessing when the ambush started. He then organized and led the movement to support and relieve his men.

With the command, "Follow me!" Takes ordered his men to seek cover on a slope below the road. It was during this movement that the squad automatic weapon gunner tumbled down the hill, losing both his weapon and helmet, he said.

Before he went down to check on the gunner, Takes had already been temporarily knocked unconscious from a rocket-propelled grenade blast and a gunshot wound to the arm, he said.

Takes, who gave his own helmet to the gunner, said he was hit in the other arm at the bottom of the slope.

At the time, Takes said he was applying a combat tourniquet to the gunner's leg with his left arm while firing his M4 with his right arm.

The gunner tells it the best, he said. "He said he was looking up at me from the ground and saw it go through, and I kinda jumped a little bit. He said I got a really upset look on my face like I was mad. He said, 'Man, that really had to hurt.'"

Just before the ambush, Takes said he and the other squad leader had stopped to discuss the terrain they were about to enter.

"You could not have asked for a better place to set up an ambush," he said. The unit they had replaced had also been ambushed in almost the same place. "It was called 'Ambush Alley.' We all knew it was coming. We had an odd feeling. The night before, nobody wanted to go

out on this mission. We just knew."

Although he was wounded, Takes stayed in Afghanistan and returned to duty after a brief hospital stay. It was not until January 2008 that he was reunited with his mother. "He was in the hospital for one week and then went back to the field," said Cindy M. Anderson, Takes' mother.

Anderson said she refused to watch the news one month before he left. "But, I had a sense from the time he left for Afghanistan to the time he came home that he was in a very dangerous place, and so — I just prayed, and prayed and prayed."

The reunion was at the airport in Charlotte, N.C., Cindy Anderson said.

"I really did not say anything. I just gave him a big old hug," she said. "It was so nice just to see him and touch his face."



Photo by Sgt. Neil W. McCabe

Maj. Gen. Rodney O. Anderson, left, commanding general of Task Force Bragg, pins the Distinguished Service Cross on Staff Sgt. James M. Takes as Col. William Ostlund, Takes' former commander, looks on.