

FROM CAP TO THE AIR FORCE

A Hero Emerges

By Kristi Carr

Dangling 50 feet above the Afghan terrain, U.S. Air Force pararescueman Staff Sgt. Thomas Culpepper was in the process of hoisting a second Army Pathfinder into the hovering HH-60G Pave Hawk. The first soldier he had brought up was critically wounded. Suddenly, the aircraft lost its lift — the result of a combination of heat, weight and altitude. The pilot called for a “shear,” meaning to cut the cable and drop the men back to earth.

But that could set off improvised explosive devices on the ground, where another soldier waited to be rescued. Instead, the flight engineer quickly completed the hoist as the helicopter dropped to within 2 feet of the ground. The pilot turned the aircraft to a place where the helicopter could recover its lift, while a wingman went in to extract the third man. This is the stuff of medals for valor.

The fuel

Culpepper credits his upbringing for instilling in him the importance of service to others. His father, in particular, grew up with hard, traditional values, he said. As Culpepper explained, “My father’s motto was ‘If you can

help someone, do it.’”

As a youngster, Culpepper took up Scouting as a path to service, but eventually he wanted more.

The match

That’s when he discovered Civil Air Patrol and joined the Florida Wing’s Seminole Composite Squadron as a cadet. “I was motivated by CAP’s search and rescue work, and I was also interested in flying.”

A year later, when his family moved to Virginia, Culpepper took CAP with him, transferring to CAP squadrons there and finishing his cadet career by serving as cadet commander for the National Capital Wing’s Mount Vernon Composite Squadron.

Two influences impacted his life while he was a cadet in Virginia. One was his participation in a CAP summer special activity for pararescue orientation; the other was Lt. Col. Peter K. Bowden, his squadron’s commanding officer. “He lit fires under all of us,” Culpepper recalled. “Under his leadership, we learned to operate beyond our years when it came to professionalism. He was always there when we needed him, and he always had the right answer.”

“That CAP pararescue course I took as a cadet sealed the deal for me. And if it weren’t for CAP, I wouldn’t have even thought of a military career. Now I’m thinking we’re going to ride this one out.” — U.S. Air Force pararescueman Staff Sgt. Thomas Culpepper

The fire

After attending George Mason University, during which time he continued in CAP as a senior member, and working in the computer field, Culpepper eventually admitted to himself that pararescue was what he really wanted to do. He joined the Air Force in 2004.

But he still had a long way to go. “Lingering in the back of my mind,” he said, “was the question of whether I could do pararescue work, given that 80-90 percent of those who try out fail.” He quelled his fears, however, and applied for the pararescue indoctrination course, which he described as a 12-week tryout with no guarantees.

And, in fact, it was not a sure shot for him. He went through the tryout three separate times.

“Despite my initial failures, they saw something in me and I kept getting invited back. It took a little bit of pain, but, in the end, I made it!” he said.

What followed was a year and a half at some very tough military schools. By the time he was dangling above Afghanistan in 2011 to rescue those trapped Army soldiers, he was the leader of his pararescue team, part of the 58th Rescue Squadron out of Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., and on his first deployment to Afghanistan.

The warmth

In March, Culpepper was awarded the Air Force’s Distinguished Flying Cross with Valor for his actions that day. The Air Force is the only U.S. military branch that awards this medal for heroism for actions taken while participating in aerial flight.

“We just got lucky,” he said modestly.



Wearing the maroon beret of a U.S. Air Force pararescueman and the Distinguished Flying Cross with Valor, Staff Sgt. Thomas Culpepper shares a salute with Air Force Lt. Gen. Bradley Heithold, U.S. Special Operations Command vice commander, on the day of the medal ceremony. Photo courtesy of U.S. Air Force Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Kevin Gray

While the critically injured soldier Culpepper first hoisted into the helicopter succumbed to his wounds, the rescuers could take some comfort in knowing they had done all they could. And the other two soldiers were delivered from a very dangerous situation.

“With our training and mission taskings, we are the ones who can reach people who

would otherwise not be saved,” Culpepper said. “Giving them a second chance at life is the greatest thing you can do for someone.”

Now with a decade of service in the Air Force, Culpepper is currently assigned as a dive instructor with the 342nd Training Squadron Detachment 2 Air Force Combat Dive Course at the Naval Diving and Salvage Center in Panama City, Fla., but he looks forward to returning to pararescue work.

“That CAP pararescue course I took as a cadet sealed the deal for me. And if it weren’t for CAP, I wouldn’t have even thought of a military career,” he said. “Now I’m thinking we’re going to ride this one out.”

The day he received his medal for valor, Culpepper wrote to Bowden: “So I got this medal today and wanted to say thank you. Believe it or not, those CAP ground team values you taught still hold true with me and led to an event like this.”

Bowden said, “I have been in CAP for 27 years and have gotten a few of these types of correspondence from former cadets. It never gets old! I am proud of the cadets who have gone on to accomplish amazing things and continue to contribute to this great nation.” ▲