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11/17/2011 - **LAUGHLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Texas** -- With smoke still lingering in the air from the rocket's explosion and its crew shaken, the HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter limped through the air, circling above its sister ship. Climbing onto the helicopters side and braving fire the man scanned below in time to see the enemy getting into position. With his weapon ready, he opened fire.

What appears to be a scene best suited for the latest video game or movie proves reality is far more impressive than fiction. Second Lt. Andy Hedin, 47th Operations Support Squadron student pilot, is no hero, or so the humble man would like you to believe.

"He has seen and done some crazy stuff," said 2nd Lt. Brandon Niewenhuis, 47th OSS student pilot and friend. "He is for real and has done something amazing."

Hedin was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, one of the Air Force's highest honors, at Moffett Federal Airfield in Mountain View, Calif., Nov. 12 alongside 11 others from the California Air National Guard's 129th Rescue Wing. The award was in recognition of his acts in the skies over Kandahar, Afghanistan Aug. 9, 2009.

"Going back home was crazy cool, but everyone in a helicopter has had something like this happen to them," said Hedin. "I kept asking myself, why am I getting this award? My whole squadron deserves it."

Hedin was born and raised in Livermore, Calif. and like many youths of the time, saw the attacks of September 11th as a call-to-arms and enlisted in the Air Force Nov. 11, 2001. Beginning as a crew chief for a C-130 Hercules, Hedin always knew the skies were for him.

"I've always known I wanted to be a pilot," said Hedin. "I planned to work towards that from the ground up."

After two years as a crew chief, Hedin was won over by the 129th Rescue Wing and became one of their newest flight engineers aboard a Pave Hawk. It would be aboard one such helicopter that Hedin would earn his medal.

Just two weeks from completing his tour and returning home, Hedin's unit was tasked with rescuing five critically wounded Navy SEALs under fire in Kandahar. His helicopter as well as another Air Force and two Army helicopters set off trailing behind A-10 Thunderbolts II sent to soften the enemy.

Hedin's helicopter was the first to touch down at the scene where the crew loaded wounded servicemembers onto the aircraft. Upon takeoff, the enemy engaged them began.

At an altitude of about 40 feet, small arms fire began to strike their craft. When Hedin stuck his head out to check, a rocket-propelled grenade exploded within the helicopter's rotor disk.

"It happened so fast, in my mind I remember being kicked back in my seat," he said. "At first I could only wonder what it was."

Hedin returned fire as the helicopter broke away, making way for its sister ship to land and pickup the remaining injured.

Noticing more enemies preparing to attack, Hedin climbed onto the side of the craft and opened fire, killing several of the attackers

Photos



Second Lt. Andy Hedin, 47th Operations Support Squadron student pilot, was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross Nov. 12 at Moffett Federal Airfield in Mountain View, Calif. for his actions over Kandahar, Afghanistan in August 2009. Hedin is credited with saving 16 lives and preventing the loss of two helicopters.

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and helping to save 16 people and two helicopters.

"By the time we began pulling out, we were basically limping back to Kandahar," Hedin said.

No longer a technical sergeant, Hedin has made the jump from enlisted to officer and is making his dream of being a pilot a reality here.

"Ten years is a lot of time on the enlisted side, it is noble and shows extreme dedication in wanting to serve his country," said Niewenhuis. "He is dedicated and has a mission in mind."

Hedin might not believe he deserves recognition, but those around him say otherwise.

"To see someone who deserves that medal get it means something is right in our country," said Niewenhuis. "Good luck to him."

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