

# THE CARGO COURIER

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## Miller awarded the Air Force Cross

By Senior Airman Ryan Conroy  
24th Special Operations Wing PA

HURLBURT FIELD, Fla. — A seven-foot bronze statue stood prominently over a sea of multi-colored berets, flanked by the chief of staff of the Air Force and the service's newest Air Force Cross recipients during a ceremony here April 20.

Two Airmen, whose heroics were separated by 11 years and 100 miles in the same war zone, solidified a Special Tactics legacy that has seen a great deal of action since 9/11. For their service, they were both presented with the Air Force Cross by Gen. David L. Goldfein, Air Force chief of staff.

"You represent the finest traits America can ask of its warriors, as you fight alongside joint and coalition teammates in crises of the highest consequence," Goldfein said during the ceremony. "When lives are on the line, you move carefully and deliberately into harm's way with protection of others in mind."

The ceremony marked the first time that two Air Force Crosses were simultaneously presented to Airmen at the Special Tactics memorial.

Goldfein presided over the historic event, presenting Christopher Baradat, a combat controller since separated, and Master Sgt. (Ret.) Keary Miller, former pararescueman, with the service's highest award for valor. Miller was assigned to the Kentucky Air National Guard's 123rd Special Tactics Squadron at the time of his courageous acts.

The Air Force Cross is presented for extraordinary heroism while engaged in military operations against an enemy of the United States. These are the eighth and ninth Air Force Crosses to be awarded since 9/11 — all have been awarded to Special Tactics Airmen since the end of the Vietnam War.

"This is the essence of Special Tactics," Goldfein said. "You do what others cannot, or will not do, and you do it because it must be done, and because there is no one better."

Miller and Baradat were previously presented the Silver Star Medal for their actions in Afghanistan in 2002 and 2013, before a service-wide review of medals was conducted in 2016. Both

medal upgrades resulted from a DOD-directed review of medals from recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan to ensure service members are appropriately recognized for their actions.

"We are a highly trained and capable ground combat force leading global access, precision strike, personnel recovery, battlefield surgery, and command-and-control missions," said Col. Michael Martin, commander of the 24th Special Operations Wing here. "When tandemed with air and space power, we can make the impossible, possible — the decisive edge in battle. Keary Miller and Chris Baradat

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Senior Airman Ryan Conroy/U.S. Air Force

Chief of Staff of the Air Force, Gen. David L. Goldfein, presents Master Sgt. (Ret.) Keary Miller, a former Kentucky Air National Guard pararescueman, with the Air Force Cross during a ceremony at Hurlburt Field, Fla., April 20.

# Mission and safety: They go together

On Jan. 27, 1967, the Apollo space program suffered a terrible setback. During a preflight test with three astronauts on board, fire swept through the command module in which they were conducting ground training and testing.

A stray ignition source within the command module's 100 percent oxygen environment quickly ignited flammable material, to include Velcro, oxygen hoses and the suits of astronauts Gus Grissom, Edward White and Roger Chaffee.

Why wasn't this fire anticipated? Without a doubt, there are several reasons. Multiple safety programs were immediately put into place after the Apollo 1 tragedy, resulting in the later successful space launches with which we're all familiar now.

"Safety is a culture... not a goal." That's the new paradigm for the Air National Guard approach to safety, and it's a good one. We want to move from reactive safety to proactive safety. We don't want to rely on yet another program to keep us safe — programs only go so far, and are generally only as successful as the time we put into them.

What if safety were present in all we do, a mindset with which we approach every task? Risk management starts with hazard identification (e.g., 100 percent oxygen around a potential ignition source with flammable material present) and results in mitigation plans.



**Col. David Mounkes**  
Commander, 123rd Airlift Wing

The target is an effective safety culture with safety programs at the unit level to help standardize what we do.

What are the programs in your unit for safety? It could be as straightforward as a written plan capturing prevention, education and utilization of the correct personal protective equipment. To go one step farther, think of your home and family — are we all aware of and taking actions to mitigate the danger of distracted driving in an age of GPS and mobile phones? Distracted driving is one of the top dangers facing not only our Airmen, but our families as well.

I encourage each of you to check out [www.safety.af.mil](http://www.safety.af.mil) when you get a chance. Pay special attention to the Occupational Safety Division statistics — they are sobering.

A culture of safety must underlay our Wing Vision: A relentlessly mission-focused organization of professional and ready Airmen dedicated to operational success in support of our state, response to contingencies and defense of our nation.

The Apollo program was certainly "relentlessly mission-focused." They had to be. Similarly, the 123rd Airlift Wing is highly mission-focused — it's the nature of our business.

The hard lessons of history clearly tell us that safety must go hand-in-hand with a relentless mission focus. When we're pressed, it is often helpful to remember that "slow is fast." Think about what you do and don't be afraid to ask questions (hence the "culture" part).

You have my full support in all that you do and your pursuit of a safety culture. Those of you who have worked with me know that I expect you to ask questions, know what you're doing and take ownership of your job.

Let me know how I can empower you. Being empowered does not imply a lack of accountability — but if you know your job, and you care about the work

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# Mission

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you do and the results achieved, with the right balance of empowerment and accountability, then we are well-postured for continued success.

Maj. J.T. Hourigan was recently awarded the Koren Kolligian Safety Award at the Pentagon from the vice chief of staff of the Air Force and the Kolligian family. Maj. Hourigan's actions on July 15, 2016, to save an in-flight C-130 experiencing severe mechanical failure, reflect not only his skill as an aviator but also the culture of the 123AW.

I couldn't be more proud of Maj. Hourigan and the 123AW, to specifically include our Wing Safety shop, the 123rd Maintenance Group, the 123rd Medical Group and the 123rd Operations Group with regards to not only the flying event itself, but also the response in the

aftermath — all of which exemplify a dedication to a culture of safety.

Being mission-focused means that we know why we're here. C-130s can't fly without all the support that goes along with such a mission (thank you, 123rd Mission Support Group!).

Make sure you don't define "mission" too narrowly. Everything we do here should move us toward successful (and safe) mission accomplishment. Further, we're an organization with a diverse set of operational missions — not only do we have eight C-130s on our ramp and all of the incredibly capable associated support that goes along with such a base, but we also have a Special Tactics Squadron, an Explosives Ordnance Disposal unit, a CBRNE Enhanced Response Force Package, two Critical Care Air Transport Teams, a Fatality Search and Recovery Team, a Joint Incident Site Communications Capability and a Contingency Response Group. That is certainly a diverse lineup.

Our mission statement mandates that we provide capability to meet the United States' national security objectives; and to provide public protection, mitigation, response and recovery during state and national crises. With the upcoming deployment cycle, all of our deploying 123AW airmen become themselves deployed war-fighters, needing all the top-rate support this base can provide.

Air logistics, civil engineering, security forces, comptroller and contracting capabilities — we'll need to be on-mission across the board.

The upcoming Unit Employment Inspection will simply validate that we are as good as we know we are — but the real mission is training and deploying, supporting and operating, all with a culture of safety.

Keep up the great work! It may sound a little over the top (we're not going to the Moon), but our country, our state and our Airmen's lives and families are counting on us.

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# Miller

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are prime examples of our professional and battle-hardened ground combat force."

During a 17-hour firefight on an Afghan mountaintop on March 4, 2002, then-Tech. Sgt. Miller — against overwhelming odds and a barrage of heavy fire from Al Qaeda militants — dashed through deep snow into the line of fire multiple times to assess and care for critically wounded U.S. service members.

"The legacy of Keary Miller is not one of momentary heroism, but of deliberate professional assessment, the application of great skill and the willingness to risk his life to save another," said Lt. Col. Sean McClane, commander of the Kentucky Air Guard's 123rd Special Tactics Squadron in Louisville, Kentucky.

"Keary dashed into the line of fire

repeatedly — not out of disregard for the risks he faced — but because of his regard for his fellow operator. Each time he did so, he made a deliberate decision to risk his own life to save another. He lived by the pararescue motto, "That Others May Live."

At the time, Miller was the combat search-and-rescue lead to recover two fellow special operations members from the top of a mountain range called Takur Ghar. During the mission, Miller is credited with saving the lives of 10 U.S. service members and the recovery of seven who were killed in action.

"We always had a saying, 'Train as you fight,' and that's what we did," Miller said. "We were used to training to the point of failure so we wouldn't fail for real. That's the community we work in; we learn to adapt to stressful and unrealistic environments as a team."

Eleven years later and more than 100 miles north of Miller's mission, then-

Staff Sgt. Baradat precisely directed thirteen 500-pound bombs and more than 1,100 rounds of ammunition during three hours of intense fighting against the Taliban in a steep valley, contributing to the safety of 150 troops and the destruction of 50 enemy and 13 separate enemy fighting positions.

To many, Baradat helped turn the tide of the battle in Afghanistan on April 6, 2013, bringing close-air support to deter an overwhelming enemy force.

For both medal recipients, the upgrade was both unexpected and humbling -- but the focus will always remain on their time serving their country.

"I don't feel a responsibility as a medal recipient; it's the oath we take and the enlistment to serve our country," Miller said. "In the military, you take pride into what you are signing up for.... The Air Force has core values you believe in, and that's your day-to-day lifestyle."