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Six paratroopers earn medals for valor for actions in combat during Afghanistan firefight

By Rick Scavetta

U.S. Army Africa Public Affairs Office

VICENZA, Italy -- In the early morning hours of July 13, 2008, Soldiers from Chosen Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment were not thinking about medals as they fought off roughly 200 insurgents attacking their vehicle patrol base in Afghanistan.

The Army, however, takes pause afterward to honor those who distinguish themselves in battle and recognizes them before their peers.

Six Soldiers from Chosen Company's 2nd platoon received medals for valor for their actions that morning in Wanat, a village in northeast Afghanistan. Nine of their comrades died during the fight.

Maj. Gen. William B. Garrett III, commander of U.S. Army Africa, presented those medals to the Soldiers during a March 20 ceremony at Caserma Ederle here.



BARBARA ROMANO

Maj. Gen. William B. Garrett III, commander of U.S. Army Africa, speaks with Spc. Jeffrey Scantlin after presenting the specialist with the Silver Star during a March 20 ceremony at Caserma Ederle in Vicenza, Italy. Also pictured are (left to right) Sgt. 1st Class Erich Phillips and Sgt. John Hayes, who also earned the Silver Star, and 1st Lt. Aaron Thurman, who received a Bronze Star for valor. The Soldiers were among six paratroopers from 2nd Platoon, Chosen Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, awarded medals for combat actions in Wanat, Afghanistan, July 13, 2008.

Receiving the Silver Star was bittersweet, said Spc. Jeffrey Scantlin, 24, of Anchorage, Alaska.

“It’s a big deal. But it brings back a lot of memories of people who should be here, but aren’t,” Scantlin said. “For me the medal is more of a group achievement, something I wear to remind me of those who didn’t come back.”

The Silver Star was also presented to Sgt. 1st Class Erich Phillips and Sgt. John Hayes. Bronze Star medals with “V” device for valor were awarded to 1st Lt. Aaron Thurman, Sgt. Hector Chavez and Spc. Tyler Hanson.

As the ceremony began, Soldiers of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team stood silent to remember those who died. Garrett then spoke about the bravery Soldiers displayed during the battle.

“Their courage under fire, valor and loyalty to each other was absolutely astounding,” Garrett said.

The platoon was near the end of its deployment to Afghanistan during which its members endured many firefights. When faced with enemy fire near Wanat, outnumbered and in some cases wounded, the paratroopers fought desperately for each other.

“Incredible acts of courage and valor were commonplace on the battlefield that day,” Garrett said.

“Today, we recognize these six Soldiers for their courage -- and we are thankful for the opportunity to serve with such men.”

Garrett stepped forward and orders were read detailing each Soldier’s actions. The six paratroopers paused for photos, the bright ribbons and shining stars standing out against their gray digital fatigues.

Rows of paratroopers in maroon berets stood before them, many of whom have their own combat experiences from Afghanistan.

Scantlin, like most of those awarded, knew they had been recommended for medals. Some knew that same day. But it meant little to them at the time, still reeling from the combat they had endured.

“We just lost nine guys - everyone was still in shock, it was surreal. It still is,” Scantlin said. “The guys that died there were my friends.”

