

Avoiding the vertical pronoun

Commentary by Brig. Gen. Darryl W. Burke 82nd Training Wing commander

7/16/2010 - SHEPPARD AIR FORCE BASE, Texas (AFNS) -- Staff Sgt. Zachary Rhyner is one of only three Airmen since Sept. 11, 2001, to receive the Air Force's highest honor, the Air Force Cross, and the only one who did not receive it posthumously.

A combat controller, Sergeant Rhyner saved countless lives by calling in more than 50 "danger close" air strikes, many virtually on top of his own position, after his special operations team was caught in a 360-degree ambush in Afghanistan's Shok Valley in April 2008. Even as he controlled eight Air Force fighters and four Army attack helicopters while perched on the side of a cliff, he laid down suppressing fire so wounded teammates could be extracted from the line of fire.

Sergeant Rhyner's actions that day were truly heroic, and his story has been rightfully used by many, including Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz, to illustrate what Airmen bring to the joint fight.

But I'd like to use his actions off the battlefield to illustrate another principle.

Earning the Air Force Cross was a big news story, and many interviews followed. Sergeant Rhyner's conduct during that time demonstrated his character almost as much as the Shok Valley experience did.

You find one word repeated over and over when Sergeant Rhyner is quoted: "We."

"We had to pull the wounded guys out ..."

"I think that was the moment when the insurgents we were fighting called time-out."

"What was going through my head was we don't have another option. We are still taking fire. We need it to stop ..."

Even noted news personality Glen Beck couldn't get Sergeant Rhyner to talk about himself.

"You make this sound like it was just, you know, another day at the office," Mr. Beck said in a Fox News interview. "But there are only -- what is it? -- 192 people who have ever received the Air Force Cross... How do you put that together in your head? I mean, you are in a very elite group."

Sergeant Rhyner's response?

"Any other combat controller put in the same situation would have performed in the same, exact way" he said. "Credit that to the training we receive and the process that we go through to become a combat controller."

No other Airman would have been more justified in basking a little in the light of fame. Yet given the ultimate opportunity to make it "all about me," Sergeant Rhyner chose instead to make it all about "we."

That is a great, great lesson for all of us.

"It's all about me" sometimes seems to be the mantra of our time, but that attitude has no place in our Air Force. We are taught from the first day we don our uniforms to subordinate our personal ambitions and desires to the needs of our unit, our service and our nation.

We can't allow ourselves to get puffed up because of rank or position, or to let awards and accolades go to our heads.

We know that "we" is a much stronger word than "I." What "I" can accomplish is insignificant, but what "we" can accomplish is virtually without limit.

Sergeant Rhyner understands that well. We can learn much from his great courage and selfless sacrifice in the line of duty. We can learn much, too, from his humble ability to avoid the vertical pronoun, even as the cameras rolled.

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Narrative from Shok Valley Battle in Afghanistan

http://www.armytimes.com/news/2008/12/army_battlenarrative_121508w/

<http://www.army.mil/-news/2008/12/15/15160-fierce-battle-above-shok-valley-earns-silver-stars/>

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On 6 April, 2008 Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha 3336 with the 201st Afghan Commando Battalion and members of ODA 3325, 3312, and 3310 conducted a dangerous and daring air assault raid, deep within Shok Valley, Afghanistan, an enemy stronghold and well known sanctuary of the Hezeb Islamic al Gulbadin (HIG) terrorist organization.

Their mission was to kill or capture multiple terrorist leaders.

In the early morning hours of 6 April, the assault force launched from Jalalabad Airfield in CH-47 and UH-60 helicopter.

Minutes later, the Green Berets and their Afghan counterparts were descending into a mountain landing zone at approximately 10,000 feet with their targets hundreds of meters directly above, situated on the top of the mountain.

Unable to land, many of the assaulters leapt from their aircraft, with more than 60 pounds of equipment, into jagged rocks, thirty degree temperatures, and running water.

Responsible for three objectives, sprawled over more than a mile, the elements ran to close the distance toward their targets.

As the assaulters ascended, at times climbing directly up sheer rock faces, Special Forces operators identified enemy moving into position and initiated contact, killing multiple combatants.

Within seconds, approximately 200 insurgents executed a well planned defense of the village, completely surrounding the assault force from the high ground. U.S. troops and Afghan Commandos were immediately trapped in a wadi, completely surrounded by mountains full of insurgent fighters in buildings and reinforced fighting positions, armed with sniper rifles, RPGs, machine guns, and AK-47's.

The lead assault element, as well, as the command and control element, were hundreds of meters up the mountain, and within direct proximity to the target, when they were pinned down by heavy machine gun fire and effective sniper fire.

Within minutes, one member of the command and control element was killed (TERP), and all elements were taking heavy casualties.

F-15 fighters and Apache helicopters initiated danger close strafing runs to protect the lead assault force, allowing them to maneuver to the casualties.

As the battle raged on for nearly seven hours, casualties mounted as the Special Forces troops called in several danger close air strikes, preventing it from being overrun on two separate occasions.

Multiple blocking positions surrounding the objectives were also in intense battles, as were US troops and Commandos within the wadi.

With severely wounded casualties trapped against a 60 foot cliff, close to death, and still taking effective sniper and machine gun fire, the Special Forces Operators executed a heroic and desperate rescue, lowering casualties as they climbed, and making multiple ascents to the besieged position. Special Forces snipers pounded enemy positions and relayed locations for airstrikes as other teammates placed explosive rounds into targets.

Meanwhile, US Special Operations forces rallied troops across eastern Afghanistan, and loaded into helicopters to reinforce the mission.

Under intense and accurate fire, the men maintained their positions, remained with their dead and wounded comrades, and refused to accept defeat.

Special Forces operators from different teams, many of which were wounded and continuing to fight, held their ground with the Afghan Commandos, turning the tide of the battle by sheer will, individual initiative, and a level of heroic determination by which all Special Forces Operators are measured.

Blackhawk MEDEVAC pilots executed a bold rescue in the hot HLZ, amid unrelenting enemy fire; flying two lifts of aircraft under power lines, to retrieve their wounded comrades.

Despite the withering gunfire, pilots continued to place themselves, and their aircraft in harm's way; one pilot wounded as he came into the LZ.

The Special Forces team, along with their Air Force Combat Controller, continued to levy accurate and devastating air strikes into the target buildings and enemy fighting positions.

At battle's end, U.S and Afghan forces emerged victorious, despite 15 wounded and 2 killed in action (1 TERP & 1 ANA); killing between 150-200 enemy fighters and resonating the fact that there will be no safe haven for the enemies of freedom and progress in Afghanistan.

"We think we sent a pretty big message to the insurgents. We let them know that we could penetrate their comfort zone. We told them there's nowhere you are safe that we aren't willing to come in and go after you," concluded Walton. (<http://www.army.mil/-news/2008/12/15/15160-fierce-battle-above-shok-valley-earns-silver-stars/>)