

CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER 4 PATRICK BENSON

U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer thinks Medevac teams have one of the toughest jobs in theater.

"They risk their lives every day transporting wounded Soldiers to safety," said Benson. "The Black Hawk helicopters typically hover 75 feet over the ground as the medics treat wounded Soldiers, leaving them dangerously exposed to enemy fire."

However, Benson doesn't serve on a Medevac team and he doesn't fly Black Hawks. Instead, as a Kiowa aircraft pilot, his job is to perform overhead security, provide reconnaissance to ground forces and to protect the Medevacs. Kiowa helicopters are smaller armed aircrafts that can provide aerial security while Medevacs treat the wounded. Knowing that the Medevacs put themselves in danger by being exposed, Benson is proud to protect the ones who transport Soldiers to safety.

"They are some of the best Medevac people I've ever seen," Benson said. "They go places they probably shouldn't to get wounded Soldiers and transport them to medical care."

Benson has served as a Kiowa pilot since 1996, but during his last deployment to Afghanistan, his skills were really put to the test. On September 8, 2009, during an intense ground fight in a valley in eastern Afghanistan, Benson was the pilot in command of the lead Kiowa aircraft when he and his wingman were called to provide aerial security to a Medevac. The Medevac needed to hoist down an Army medic, allow him to survey two wounded Soldiers on the ground, and then hoist all three back into the Black Hawk. Knowing that there was still an enemy presence in the area, Benson navigated the Kiowa between the infantry on the ground and the Medevac in the air to protect the Black Hawk and the wounded Soldiers from enemy fire.

As the last Soldier was being hoisted up, Benson's aircraft was hit by a round of enemy fire from the ground. The Kiowa helicopter jerked to the right and was spinning out of control. Benson had multiple gunshot wounds to his leg and his co-pilot was unconscious. Benson immediately grabbed the controls, commanded the helicopter and descended out of the valley.

"My main mission was to get my co-pilot to medical attention," recalls Benson. "My wing man (in the second Kiowa aircraft) stayed behind to engage the enemy." The Black Hawk Medevac managed to leave the area as well, despite taking a round of fire to its nose. Benson navigated his Kiowa to safety and he and his co-pilot were rushed to medical attention.



CW4 Benson earned the American Legion Valor Award and the Purple Heart for his actions in Afghanistan.

"I've been shot at a few other times. But this was the first time enemy fire had made contact with me or the aircraft I was in," said Benson. Benson was hit in the right leg and thigh, and his co-pilot had a bullet wound to the left rear of his head.

"Every time you cross the wire, you need to be ready," said Benson. "Protecting such an exposed target, we know we're in danger. But, if the medics are coming into that environment and doing everything they can to take our wounded Soldiers back to safety, there's nothing else I can do but protect them."

For his actions on September 8, 2009, Benson was honored with the Army's American Legion Valor Award, which is presented annually to recognize military aviators who perform a feat of courage or bravery during the prior year.

Benson, who has also received a Purple Heart and a combat action badge, is humbled by the recognition.

"There are a billion stories like this every day," he said, referring to the September 8 mission. "Every day, there are Americans out there doing this same stuff. There are so many servicemembers doing great things in battle. We are doing what we're trained to do. Every single day, another American is doing something like what we were doing that day."