

MAJOR DARIN GAUB

U.S. Army Major Darin Gaub learned a lot on his first deployment to Afghanistan from 2003 to 2004. But it was nothing compared to his second deployment.

During his first deployment, Gaub served as an aviation task force intelligence officer. He provided air crews with intelligence briefings for their daily missions, as well as maintained accountability for headquarters staff and equipment.

"It wasn't a glorious job, but it needed to be done," he said.

"That [deployment] told me that I didn't want to go back to Afghanistan and be in a staff position, that I wanted to go back and be in a leadership position, and go out into the country more."

He got what he asked for in his second deployment.

"That one was a lot more eventful," Gaub said. "It was more active, and more hazardous. And more rewarding."

When Gaub was redeployed to Afghanistan in 2006 he went as the commander of a Blackhawk company. He had gone to flight school in 1998, the same year he was commissioned as an officer. During the first half of the year-long deployment he flew almost eight hours a day.

The 10 Blackhawk helicopters in his company were flown on missions of all kinds. They did everything from accompanying Special Forces on assault missions, to transporting the Commanding General of the 10th Mountain Division.



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However, one of the most intense missions of the whole deployment, Gaub said, was a battlefield circulation mission Gaub piloted over the northeast of the country.

Three Blackhawks and one Apache helicopter were involved in the mission to fly some soldiers over the battlefields where a major offensive was to be started. Each Blackhawk had eight to 10 passengers aboard, Gaub said.

As the four helicopters come down a valley, "we got caught in a complex ambush," Gaub said. "They were hit with rocket propelled grenades (RPGs), and machine gun fire of all different types.

"It created some drama," he said.

While the first aircraft flew through the ambush unscathed, the second had some damage to its rotor blades. When Gaub, who was piloting one of the Blackhawks, flew through the ambush a RPG exploded right above them, going right through the rotor system, and knocking the helicopter onto its side, he said.

Said Gaub, "I had one crew chief saying 'All I can see is machine gun fire,' and the other one saying 'All I can see is sky.'"

HEROES

Gaub managed to right the helicopter, and escape the rest of the ambush to a tiny base and air strip in Jalalabad, where they could assess the damage to the Blackhawk.

In Jalalabad they decided that the helicopter could be flown back to their home base in Bagram. However the helicopter was vibrating, and "acting kind of funny," Gaub said. For safety he flew slowly and no more than 50 feet off the ground,--in case the engine gave out.

"It's in the back of your mind," he said. "You're thinking 'don't break, don't fall apart on me.' But you can't do anything about it, so you keep flying."

When they arrived at Bagram he was able to land, and got the engines to idle.

"And that's when they shut off," he said. "And they're not supposed to do that...My co-pilot and I just kind of looked at each other and we were like 'Well. That was well-timed.'"

After the fact, everyone involved was pretty shaken up, Gaub said, but he still went out and flew again the next day.

"You don't have time to stop and think about it," he said. "You just keep going."

Gaub earned a Bronze Star for his 2003 to 2004 deployment, and an Air Medal and Combat Action Badge for the 2006 to 2007 deployment.

