

Rocky Mountain News

MASSARO: Upbringing leads wounded GI to heroism

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Army Reserve Sgt. Gregory S. Ruske, center, and an interpreter try to calm Afghan National Police officers wounded in combat in April in the Afghanya Valley, Kapisa Province, Afghanistan. Later this month, Sgt. Ruske will receive the Silver Star for heroism in the war in Afghanistan.

Don't call Sgt. Gregory S. Ruske a hero, even though the Army gave him a medal for being one.

In mid-month, Ruske will receive the Silver Star for heroism in the war in Afghanistan.

Ruske, 28, of Aurora, was called to active duty and sent to Afghanistan in September 2007. He was a short-timer on April 21, when his squad

was ambushed in Afghanya, Kapisa Province.

"I was rear security," he said. "Everyone took cover in a shallow ditch."

He was armed with a grenade launcher, shooting back at the guys shooting at him.

Ruske's men pulled back into an orchard. He and two others climbed on a roof of a house with hopes of having a better fire zone at the enemy. They didn't, and, in fact, were more exposed. So they started to climb down. And Ruske was shot in the hip.

"Someone put a pressure pack on me," he said.

An Afghan police officer, on patrol with the American squad, also was hit and pinned down by enemy fire. Ruske braved the enemy fire to rescue the policeman. His buddies laid down cover fire so he and another soldier could pull the wounded ally to safety.

"Any person would go out and help out a fellow person in need given the situation," Ruske said in a teleconference Tuesday. "They were still shooting the person while he was crawling."

Ruske told Army officials: "I don't consider myself a hero. I was just an ordinary guy put in an extraordinary position. I reacted based on my upbringing, training and compassion. And, thankfully, it worked out in the end."

Serving in the military runs in the family. His grandfather and stepfather both served.

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"My grandfather instilled a lot of patriotism in me," he said. "My mother also taught me a lot about having compassion for my fellow man. She was always there for her friends when they needed something. She'd help them move, or paint a house or visit them in the hospital."

Ruske was born at Fort Carson. He graduated from Liberty High School in Colorado Springs and served active duty in the Army. When he was a senior at Colorado State University-Pueblo, he was "involuntarily assigned" to the reserves.

He graduated with a degree in sociology in 2005. He re-enlisted for six years in the reserves the following year.

After moving to Aurora, he got a civilian job as a guard with the Colorado Youth Corrections facility in Lakewood.

"I got into it right out of college," he said.

He was checking state and federal job openings when he came upon the youth corrections job.

"It seemed interesting," he said. "It's definitely interesting. You get a lot of personalities coming through there."

He said that when he gets back to Aurora after his tour is over, he's going to "chill out at my house."

He said he relishes being able to drink water out of a tap once again, one of the pleasures he's missed in Afghanistan.

"It's all the little things, definitely the little things," he said.

When he's not a soldier or a prison guard, Ruske likes to hike Colorado's Fourteeners.

He's a long way from the Rockies for now, in Florida where he'll receive his Silver Star later this month. But there are days when he thinks about the ambush in the dry hills of Afghanistan.

After the firefight, Ruske said he and his crew were shipped back to safety. He was sent to an Army field hospital, but he checked on the Afghan police officer he helped rescue.

"He was all bandaged up," Ruske said. "But they saved his leg. Nobody died that day."

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