

HEROES

Each week the Defense Dept. highlights the military men and women who have gone above and beyond in the global war on terror.



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Seattle, WA

Distinguished Flying Cross Recipient

Air Force Maj. Keith M. Wolak

One of the few constants for troops in a war zone is knowing that the military will do everything in its power to find those missing in action. For the servicemen charged with carrying out search and rescue operations, the burden is matched only by the dangers: operating in close quarters, coordinating support, precise timing, direct engagement with the enemy – all while safeguarding the lives of the missing troops. On the night of July 2, 2005, near the eastern border of Afghanistan, then-Air Force Capt. Keith Wolak led the airborne component of the largest search and rescue task force since the commencement of Operation Enduring Freedom – and his tireless dedication to the mission helped save the life of a Navy SEAL.

Wolak, whose call sign is “Wookie,” coordinated 17 aircraft within 16 square miles in the search for the lone surviving member of a Navy SEAL Team, Former Navy Petty Officer 1st Class and Navy Cross recipient [Marcus Luttrell](#). Wolak commanded an A-10 Thunderbolt II, commonly known as the Warthog. Even for the A-10, which is designed for close-air support, the terrain proved daunting: a mountainous landscape, 2,000 foot ceilings, crowded airspace, and cloudy skies – all of which left no margin for error.

Hostile forces abounded in the terrain below, and they had recently proven to be a formidable surface-to-air threat; just one week earlier, they had taken down a helicopter holding 16 Americans.

When the A-10 leading the attack developed an equipment malfunction, Wolak quickly moved his plane into position to confront the enemies and take out any heavy weaponry. He made numerous attack runs, unleashing 30-millimeter rounds from the aircraft’s Gatling gun – capable of firing up to 3,900 rounds per minute – to destroy Taliban positions on the mountainsides.



Although the enemies had been neutralized, the rescue effort still hung in the balance – the rescue helicopter had only five minutes of fuel left, complicated by bad weather and poor visibility. In a brief ten-second window – when the clouds suddenly parted – Wolak managed to successfully mark with infrared lighting a landing zone for the helicopter. The crew located and evacuated Luttrell and two Afghans who had come to his aid. Later, the crew said that without Wolak’s guidance the mission would have failed.

As with so many troops, Wolak has remained humble about his accomplishments: “Any of the other pilots in the same shoes as me would have done the same thing,” he said. For his heroism, the Air Force awarded Wolak the Distinguished Flying Cross on July 27, 2007, at Pope Air Force Base in North Carolina.

Air Force [story](#); *Fayetteville Observer* [story](#); *News & Observer* [story](#)