

Remembering heroes: 320th STS holds memorial

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RIGHT: Tech. Sgt. Ronald O'Steen, a member of Kadena's 320th Special Tactics Squadron, salutes his lost friends, Master Sgt. William McDaniel and Staff Sgt. Juan Ridout, during a memorial service here Feb. 27. (Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Georgina Jones)



Kadena mourns 320th PJs killed in Philippines

By Senior Airman Jason Lake
18th Wing Public Affairs

Maj. Jeffrey Staha fought back tears as he remembered two of his troops during a memorial service here Feb. 27.

Staha's troops — Master Sgt. Bill McDaniel and Staff Sgt. Juan Ridout — were killed in a helicopter crash off the southern coast of the Philippines Feb. 22.

The two 320th Special Tactics Squadron pararescuemen were on a mission in support of Operation Enduring Freedom when the Army MH-47 Chinook helicopter they were on crashed into the sea. Eight soldiers from Ft. Campbell, Ky., also died in the crash.

A ringing telephone woke Staha in the early morning hours of Feb. 22. The major said he knew something serious had happened even before he picked up the phone.

“When you get a call at 4 a.m., you know it's something bad,” Staha said. “I just wondered which two (pararescuemen) I had lost.”

Staff Sgt. John Romspert, a friend and coworker of McDaniel and Ridout, said his heart sank when Staha broke the news to him and other troops in the unit that morning.

“My heart dropped down into my stomach when I heard about the accident,” Romspert said.

The rescue mission for the missing service members changed to a recovery mission Feb. 24, and the 320th STS prepared for the Feb. 27 memorial service to honor McDaniel and Ridout.

Staha stood before more than 1,000 mourners who attended the service and told the audience: “I think it's important for the families and friends to know that when this accident occurred, the flight lead and fellow 320th STS pararescuemen sprang into action to search (for) and rescue their fallen comrades.”

Staff Sgt. Tim Tweeter and Senior Airman Aaron Butler, also from the 320th, were deployed with McDaniel and Ridout in the Philippines when the helicopter went down. Staha said the two airmen were called into action to help rescue their friends, and both put their lives at risk in darkness and bad weather to rescue the downed aircrew, but they were unable to find any survivors.

Staha struggled to continue speaking of his two troops as Kadena's flightline, normally filled with the sounds of roaring aircraft engines, was silent.

“During these last few difficult days I have wondered what I could possibly say to honor Master Sgt. Bill McDaniel and Staff Sgt. Juan Ridout,” he said. “Both Juan and Bill trained long and hard to become PJs, both fought to get on this mission, and both died together serving their country in the global war on terrorism.”

Romspert also spoke of his close friend, Ridout, and mentor, McDaniel, during the service.

“Juan was a unique PJ,” he said. “He was one of the few who would tell you straight up that he was not comfortable with an operation or that he was a little nervous going into a training (session), but he never faltered. He was always the straight shooter and wise cracker, but he never forgot how to be humble; never once did he brag or boast about his combat mission in Bosnia or the warrior’s rack on his uniform. I have a lot of great memories of Juan.”

Reflecting on a recent mission with McDaniel, Romspert snickered and said, “No matter how bad (a mission) got, Bill was always there with a smile. He always made sure to tell you how you were doing and was able to find some good in everything.”

Romspert explained that while on the mission, McDaniel was thrown into the sea when his raft overturned and he was forced to walk the rest of the way to shore.

“As he was coming on shore we noticed that the zipper on his dry suit was left open and his suit was filled with water up to his waist,” Romspert said. “Bill came in shaking his head, but as soon as he saw us laughing, he realized just how funny it was. He smiled and went on with the mission. I believe that Bill had his biggest smile on his last mission. (Being a pararescueman) was what he loved to do.”

At the close of the memorial, pararescuemen and combat controllers in the 320th STS stood side by side for role call before saying goodbye to their fallen friends one last time.

Pairs of pararescuemen, combat controllers, combat weathermen and Army Special Forces members marched silently to the altar, which was shrouded by an open parachute and strewn with mementos of the two heroes. As “Amazing Grace” played on the bagpipes, some of the seasoned warriors walked away in tears after leaving their beret flashes at the memorial.

“Saying goodbye is never easy,” Romspert said. “It’s especially hard when that goodbye is forever. We may have to say goodbye to two teammates, friends, a father and soul mate right now, but it does not mean that we have to forget them. As long as we remember to tell the memories that we have, our friends will live on in our hearts and minds. Juan and Bill will always be close to us.”

To honor and remember the two heroes of his squadron, Tech. Sgt. Ronald O’Steen penciled a memorial picture of his two close friends. The picture now hangs on the wall in the 320th STS.

“This is one way to show our love for our fallen comrades,” O’Steen said.

McDaniel, a Greenville, Ohio, native, is survived by his wife and son, Deborah and Alexander, his parents, William and Shannon, and his sister, Dana Baker. McDaniel was

assigned to Kadena in 2001 and was nominated as the 320th STS's Pararescueman of the Year for 2001.

Ridout, a native of Corpus Christie, Texas, is survived by his father, Mike, and his sister, Jessica. He is also survived by his long-time girlfriend, Stacey Fejer. The Operation Allied Force veteran arrived at Kadena in 1999 and was nominated as the 320th STS's Pararescueman of the Year the same year for his role in rescuing a downed F-16 pilot in Kosovo.

Editor's note: *People interested in helping the families of McDaniel and Ridout can send checks or money orders made out to the William McDaniel Pararescueman Memorial Fund or the Juan M. Ridout Pararescueman Memorial Fund. The mailing address is: 320th STS, Unit 5248, APO AP 96368-5248. Donors may also make deposits to these accounts at Community Bank.*