

IN GALLANT SERVICE

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BRAVERY AND DEDICATION RECOGNISED

Australia's first ever Star of Gallantry – second only to the Victoria Cross – has been awarded to a sergeant from the Sydney-based 4th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (Commando).

On separate parades in Sydney and Perth late last year, Major General Michael Jeffrey, Governor General of Australia, presented several medals for gallantry to members of the Special Forces Task Group who had recently returned from operations in Afghanistan.

The Governor General also announced that combat elements of the SFTG would receive a Unit Citation for Gallantry, while the task group as a whole would be awarded a Meritorious Unit Citation.

He described the actions of our soldiers as being in the highest traditions of Special Operations Command, the Australian Army and the Australian Defence Force.

The soldiers, predominantly from 4RAR (Cdo) and the Special Air Service Regiment encountered a tenacious enemy in Afghanistan, almost daily, during their 12-month deployment. They were involved in some of the most ferocious fighting Australians have seen since Vietnam.



MERITORIOUS UNIT CITATION

The Australian Medical Detachment deployed to Balad, Iraq from May to September 2005, was awarded a Meritorious Unit Citation for service and outstanding professional competency in the provision of health care in support of the United States Air Force Theatre Hospital, Balad.

During its deployment as part of Operation Catalyst in 2005, members of the detachment were involved in treating more than 5000 patients.

The detachment comprised 45 regular and specialist reserve medical personnel from the Army and Air Force from across Australia.

In presenting the award, the Chief of Air Force Air Marshal Geoff Shepherd acknowledged the hard work of all the men and women who deployed in medical roles in support of Operation Catalyst.

"Our medical personnel are very highly regarded among our international colleagues who were most impressed by the professionalism and dedication displayed in support of Operation Catalyst," he said.

"Your invaluable work as part of coalition medical facilities in Balad, often in very challenging circumstances, is something for which we should all be very proud."



SERGEANT 'A' – STAR OF GALLANTRY

For conspicuous gallantry in action, and for leadership

During the conduct of an operation in southern Afghanistan in 2006, a combined coalition force conducted a direct-action mission against a target in Oruzgan Province.

Upon insertion, the assault force, provided by another Coalition partner, was surrounded, and suffered two wounded and one killed in action.

A commando reaction force was deployed to assist by securing a helicopter landing zone and covering their withdrawal. As Sergeant A's section was the lead element of the commando reaction force, he received the most intense weight of enemy fire.

At the landing zone, the commandos came under immediate heavy fire from rockets and small arms, from multiple flanks. The commandos held the position, under fire, for more than an hour.

Sergeant A was responsible for securing the northern flank, repelling a number of assaults while being engaged from ranges as close as 50m.

After the extraction was complete, the commandos began their return to base. The enemy anticipated this and had prepared a series of ambushes. Critically, Sergeant A's vehicle was the first to be engaged at each ambush location. In each instance, he led his section to assault and clear opposition from the route, in rapid and aggressive counter attacks, despite frequent heavy fire.

On one occasion, with absolute disregard for his own safety, Sergeant A conducted an assault on a machinegun position not more than 30m to his front.

On at least two other occasions, while being engaged from positions as close as 5m, and receiving multiple bullet strikes on his vehicle, Sergeant A was forced to fight his way through ambushes by driving directly through the killing ground, which he did without hesitation.

Through outstanding leadership and composure under fire, Sergeant A led the commandos through several ambushes without injury.

To read the abridged citations of other Gallantry-award recipients, visit our web site at www.militarycontact.com



DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS

An Australian Army helicopter pilot was presented with a British Distinguished Flying Cross by the Queen at an investiture at Buckingham Palace in November.

Major Scott Watkins served on exchange with the British Army in the Joint Helicopter Force-Iraq in 2004-05. He was awarded the medal for his actions while flying in support of the 1st Black Watch Battlegroup.

Chief of Army Lieutenant-General Peter Leahy said Major Watkins was recognised for his service, professional ability and courage.

"Major Watkins exhibited skill and calm decision-making during difficult and dangerous operations," he said.

In one incident, Major Watkins took control of the British Lynx helicopter in which he was the co-pilot, after its pilot was injured by small-arms fire while flying in support of Black Watch operations south of Baghdad. Watkins, a captain at the time, piloted the helicopter to a nearby coalition base and the pilot was evacuated to hospital.

Lieutenant-General Leahy said that on other occasions, and despite a very real threat to his aircraft, Major Watkins repeatedly placed himself in exposed positions in order to provide support to other aircraft and the ground forces they were supporting.

"In the opinion of the Commanding Officer of the Black Watch, Major Watkins' actions undoubtedly saved the lives of a number of soldiers in the battlegroup."

Major Watkins is the first Australian to receive the UK honour since the Vietnam War.

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