

Jason D. Cunningham

The battle of Takur Ghar was by far the deadliest military engagement during Operation Anaconda for the U.S. Also known as the battle of Roberts Ridge, the battle of Takur Ghar only lasted 2 days, but resulted in 7 of the 8 US deaths during the entirety of Operation Anaconda.

As an MH-47E Chinook code-named “Razor 3” with a handful of Navy SEALs were scouting out the top of Takur Ghar, they were met with resistance. The al-Qaeda fighters destroyed vital hydraulic lines on the helicopter using machine guns and RPGs. This caused the pilot to pull up and fly away without inserting the SEAL team. In the chaos, nobody had noticed Petty Officer 1st Class Neil Roberts fall out of the helicopter and get captured by al-Qaeda. After hearing this, Major General Franklin L. Hagenbeck allowed the rest of Razor 3 to return and retrieve Roberts.

Razor 4, another Chinook flying with Razor 3, picked up the SEALs from the downed aircraft and dropped them off where they believed Roberts was. Unbeknownst to the SEALs at the time, Roberts was dead. Whether it was from the fall or getting shot out of the helicopter, we’re not sure, but now it was a fight for their lives. At sunrise, two more Chinooks, Razor 1 and 2, came and offered 15 Rangers, 1 EATC, and 2 PJs to assist in the search and rescue mission. Of the two Pararescuers, one of them was Senior Airman Jason D. Cunningham.

According to his colleagues and family, Cunningham was a man full of enthusiasm, dedication, and motivation. Whenever help was needed, Cunningham was always the first one offering help. He spent hours of each day working with surgeons and medical staff in order to improve his medical skills. Thanks to his work with doctors, he played a major role in the decision to send pararescuers into the field with blood for transfusions. Even though he had been

a PJ for 8 months, he had never been in combat and was yearning for a chance to do his job on the battlefield.

As Razor 1 was trying to land, heavy fire, grenades, and RPGs injured many of the soldiers and made the helicopter fall out of the sky 80 feet in the air. Luckily, nobody was seriously hurt in the crash landing. When the aircraft hit the ground, the Rangers had little cover, and many were injured or killed from enemy fire. After seeing this happen and realizing that landing would be near-impossible and dangerous, Razor 2 left without dropping off their Rangers.

On the ground, Cunningham, another PJ, 2 Ranger Medics, and a 160th Medic had their hands full in the Chinook's cargo area. When the front part of the helicopter caught on fire and a mortar shell landed within 50 feet of the Razor, Cunningham decided to move his patients to somewhere safer. Using a makeshift sled, he was able to move them across enemy fire on 7 separate occasions. While relocating, the 160th Medic was shot in the abdomen twice and shortly afterwards, Cunningham was shot in his right side through his pelvis. While both were mortally wounded, they continued to treat the wounded Rangers.

Unfortunately, the landing zone was still hot, so Cunningham could not be evacuated in time to be saved. When things had cleared up 7 hours later, medics performed CPR on him for 30 minutes, but it was of no use. When the battle of Takur Ghar was over, Cunningham along with 6 other Americans were carried off the mountain in 3 MH-47s.

Senior Airman Jason D. Cunningham was posthumously awarded the Air Force Cross on September 13, 2002. The Air Force Cross is awarded for extraordinary heroism while engaged in action against the enemy or our nation. It is second only to the Medal of Honor. In the end, he gave his life in order to save 10 others and is recognized as a hero to many.