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Army pilot shows courage under fire

By Christopher Nagy
DAILY PRESS & ARGUS

U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer Monica Narhi was sure the wounded soldier was going to be all right, just as soon as Staff Sgt. Peter Rohrs, the most senior and seasoned medic in the platoon, was able to get on the ground.

However, getting Rohrs down safely was presenting its own series of problems.

At the moment, he was dangling 80 feet over mountainous terrain on the northeastern side of Afghanistan, near the border with Pakistan. Rohrs was being lowered by a hoist from the UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter being piloted by Narhi, a Hartland Township native, and the craft was taking fire from unfriendlies below.

This was July 27, and it was the scene that

eventually earned Narhi, the pilot in command that morning, and her three-member 82nd Airborne medevac crew the DUSTOFF Association's Rescue of Year.

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The four soldiers were honored in a ceremony March 1 at the annual convention of the DUSTOFF Association, an organization of active and retired medevac personnel that is associated with the Army Medical Department, held at the Army Medical Department Museum in San Antonio, Texas.

"It was just great to be a part of that team," said Narhi, who began flying as a medevac pilot roughly a year ago. "I feel like such a small participant, but I'm very proud to do it. The medics are the ones who are incredible. They're awesome. We drop them off, and they're the ones who take the fire and are in the firefight. I've never felt a sense of purpose like I have in medevac."

Narhi has been in the military for nine years. She graduated from Hartland High School in 1994, and entered the University of Michigan on an ROTC scholarship. A self-described "tomboy" in a family of seven siblings, Narhi said she developed a fascination with the military in her middle school years, watching movies and TV shows such as "Platoon" and "Tour of Duty," and reading books such as Robert Mason's "Chickenhawk" and Michael J. Novosel's "DUSTOFF: The Memoir of an Army Aviator."

"I think it's very typical of a lot of people who go into the military," Narhi explained. "You just kind of get swept up in the awe of it."

She was commissioned into the Army as a second lieutenant. A request to go into aviation was approved, and Narhi eventually rose to the rank of captain. As such, she served as a Black Hawk air-assault pilot in both Kosovo and Iraq, primarily transporting dignitaries and supplies; however, Narhi said her rank proved to be more of a managerial post — when what she wanted was to be in the air.

"So I transferred rank to warrant officer," she said. "It was kind of a voluntary demotion. Now, I'm kind of inbetween the enlisted and the commissioned officers, but all I do is fly. That's my main job."

She ended up as a medevac pilot with the 82nd Airborne, and recently returned from a 13-month tour in Afghanistan, during which the rescue took place that earned her accolades and demonstrated "the true spirit of DUSTOFF in the accomplishment of the cited mission in order to save a life," according to the Rescue of the Year nomination letter submitted by Narhi's commanding officer, Maj. Kyle J. Burrow.

In addition to Narhi and Rohrs, the crew on board that July morning also included Spc. Kelton Glorfield, the crew chief who operated the hoist and happened to be on his first medevac mission; and Chief Warrant Officer John Russell, a pilot. The urgent call came over at around 9 a.m. The report indicated a soldier from the 173rd Airborne had suffered a gunshot wound to the neck at an American observation post and needed to be evacuated as quickly as possible.



Photo by ALAN WARD/DAILY PRESS & ARGUS

U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer Monica Narhi talks Tuesday afternoon at the Uptown Coffee House in Howell about being a part of the DUSTOFF Association's Rescue of the Year for a July mission in Afghanistan.

ABOUT MONICA NARHI

As Narhi took the controls and went airborne with her crew, the Black Hawk picked up two Arizona National Guard Apache gunship escorts en route to the pickup zone because of reports of enemy fire.

"It took a while for the Apaches to clear us in, so we kind of took an orbit over the mountains, waiting for them to call us in," she explained.

When Narhi got the OK, the Black Hawk moved into position, but began taking fire and had to pull off.

"The Apaches came in as well as the ground forces and returned fire on the enemy," she said. "We came in again, and we came under fire again, but by this time the medic was being lowered. ... None of it hit our aircraft, but we could see it coming in and hitting the (pickup zone)."

Rohrs, however, made it safely to the ground, located the injured soldier, and the two were hoisted back up into the Black Hawk as Narhi made a hasty retreat — still under fire.

"We never got hit once, so that was great," she said. "It was the middle of the day, so we were an easy target. We must have just been out of their range."

Both of the Apache gunships were shot through the tail section, but made it out of the area safely.

To make the perfect story, the wounded soldier also recovered from his injuries.

"He came running out a few months later to the Apaches," Narhi said. "He just saw a helicopter and he was excited."

July 27 wasn't a typical day, Narhi noted; but it wasn't the only time she came under fire while serving in Afghanistan as a medevac pilot. However, it was a day — and a mission — that stood out with her superiors, who nominated Narhi and her crew for the DUSTOFF Association Rescue of the Year award. "DUSTOFF" has been the call sign for medevac units since the Vietnam War. Since then, it has become an acronym for Dedicated Unhesitating Service To Our Fighting Forces.

"If they get on the radio and call for a DUSTOFF to come in, or hear that a DUSTOFF is coming in, then they know the medevac is in the air," Narhi said.

Each year, the DUSTOFF Association holds a reunion for its roughly 1,200 members, and presents awards for Rescue of the Year as well as Aviator of the Year, Crew Chief of the Year and Medic of the Year.

* **Age:** 31

* **Occupation:** Narhi is a chief warrant officer with the U.S. Army 82nd Airborne, aka the "All-American Division."

* **Residence:** Narhi is currently stationed at Fort Bragg in North Carolina, but she was raised in Hartland Township, graduating from Hartland High School in 1994.

* **Family:** Narhi's mother, Donna, still lives in Livingston County. Her father, David, died last year. She has seven siblings — five sisters and two brothers — who all live in the Howell and Byron areas. "They stay close to Mom and take care of her, which is comforting to me because I can't be there," Narhi said.

* **Hobbies:** Running, biking and camping. "All those typical tom-boy things," Narhi said.

 Zoom Photo



File photo by ALAN WARD/DAILY PRESS & ARGUS

Monica Narhi, left, returns to Hartland High School in 2003

Retired Col. Dan Gower, executive director of the DUSTOFF Association, said Narhi's mission stood out among the nominees for Rescue of the Year, which also included entries for a multiship incident that involved mass casualties from a large improvised explosive device and a stateside incident in response to tornado damage in Alabama.

"This one," Gower said of Narhi's mission, "had a higher element of risk because of the hostile activity that was taking place in the area. Also, a hoist operation is probably one of the most vulnerable. It tends to make it a very, very hair-raising experience for all those involved."

The hoist and the hostility also made the mission stand out from the pack for Col. Robert D. Mitchell, president of the DUSTOFF Association.

"(Chief Warrant Officer) Narhi, who was at the controls, and the rest of the crew ... performed heroically and, ultimately, saved the life of a fellow soldier," Mitchell said in an e-mail. "(Chief Warrant Officer) Narhi delivered an exceptional acceptance speech at the DUSTOFF reunion ... and received a standing ovation from the crowd. We are very proud of her and her crew."

However, Narhi said she should be the one hoisting praise to the DUSTOFF Association.

"We're very honored to be chosen by these pilots and medics that, really, are our heroes," Narhi said. "These are the guys who inspired me. I was quite honored to be recognized by these guys."

Yet, for some, it's Narhi who is the one to inspire.

"Of course, being a mom, what she got (the award) for was kind of frightening, but I'm very proud of her," said Narhi's mother, Donna.

For the immediate future, Narhi's mother won't have to worry too much. Narhi, who returned to the U.S. Feb. 9 and is now stationed at Fort Bragg in North Carolina, should be stateside for a year or two. However, she noted that medevac units are needed in Iraq, and Narhi said her U.S. stay could be shorter than initially planned.

Still, Narhi has no regrets. For the moment, serving — going where she is told to go, doing what is needed to get the job done — is who she is.

"The military is very hard on the personal life," Narhi noted. "I would like to have a family someday ... but as long as I continue to enjoy it, I'll stay. I certainly wouldn't mind retiring from the military. It's hard to imagine what I could do if I got out that could match this."

with mementos and stories of her experiences in Iraq. Longtime Hartland teacher Janice Cooley and Narhi's sister Pam Iden look over the military map and evasion charts carried by troops in Iraq.

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SUBMITTED PHOTO

Members of the crew that won the DUSTOFF Association's Rescue of the Year are, from left to right, Spc. Kelton Glorfield, hoist operator; Chief Warrant Officer Monica Narhi, Hartland Township native and pilot in command; Chief Warrant Officer John Russell, pilot; and Staff Sgt. Peter Rohrs, medic.

[+ Zoom Photo](#)

Contact Daily Press & Argus copy editor Christopher Nagy at (517) 552-2826 or at cnagy@gannett.com.

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Comments by: **jimeshelman** Posted: Sun Mar 23, 2008 11:53 am
Tremendous example of a true hero!!!

Comments by: **Jim_Pratt** Posted: Sun Mar 23, 2008 8:46 am
Good Job, Chief.

Thank you for your dedicated service.
and Welcome Home.

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SUBMITTED PHOTO

From left to right, Spc. Kelton Glorfield, Chief Warrant Officer John Russell, Staff Sgt. Peter Rohrs and Chief Warrant Officer Monica Narhi, all of the 82nd Airborne, were recently awarded the Rescue of the Year for a July 27 medevac mission in northeast Afghanistan.

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