

'Without you guys, I wouldn't be here'

■ Tech. Sgt. Christian MacKenzie receives the Purple Heart for injuries he sustained in Iraq.

By JEFF AYRES
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HURLBURT FIELD — As he first took the stage before his fellow airmen on Friday, words were hard to come by for Tech. Sgt. Christian MacKenzie.

After all, how easily could he articulate what were, in real time, just several minutes — minutes that perhaps were the defining moment of his life, when his decisions and those of five men with him on a helicopter would determine whether they lived or died?

With a choked voice and a Purple Heart just pinned to his chest, the words finally came.

"To my crew, some amazing things were done to get us on the ground," said the Hurlburt airman after receiving the Purple Heart at a ceremony.

The award is given to sol-



Daily News/MARI DARR-WELCH

Above, Tech. Sgt. Christian MacKenzie bears the scars of where shrapnel hit his face and left eye. Below, the airman wears the Purple Heart medal he was awarded Friday.



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HEART

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diers wounded in combat.

"Without you guys, I wouldn't be here."

He was flight engineer on an MH-53 Pave Low on a resupplying mission near Fallujah, Iraq, for other special operations aircraft on the night of April 12.

The chopper wasn't flying directly over a city, so there wasn't much more than the stars to illuminate what was outside.

What the crew soon saw was a rocket-propelled grenade, fired by Iraqi insurgents, heading right at them.

The grenade struck the front of the Pave Low, destroying its windshield, ripping apart its center console and sending shrapnel burrowing into MacKenzie's face and left eye.

MacKenzie and his crew said it wasn't unusual for their helicopter to occasionally draw

enemy fire while on missions.

But, added Capt. Matt Berry, pilot of a chopper flying with MacKenzie's helicopter, "Not like this."

MacKenzie said his physical condition, and the fact that the Pave Low's intercom was destroyed by the strike, kept him from being able to communicate with the rest of the crew.

But he said he "had no concerns," aside from his injuries, because he believed in the ability of his partners.

"It's a very difficult experience to explain," said MacKenzie, who was accompanied by his wife, his two daughters and other family at the ceremony.

Capt. Steve Edwards, one of the Pave Low's pilots, said he was struck in the left arm by shrapnel but was able to regain the chopper's controls and make an emergency landing.

"As soon as I felt that aircraft start to approach, it (felt) right," MacKenzie recalled.

Once the Pave Low landed,

Berry's chopper rescued the crew. Edwards and co-pilot Capt. Thomas Lessner, also struck by RPG shrapnel, have already received Purple Hearts for their injuries.

MacKenzie said his sight is improving, but he will need more surgery. He's also had surgery on his face.

But he said he's proud to do his part in trying to bring peace and democracy to a country that hasn't seen much of either.

He said most Iraqis he and his Pave Low crew heard from were happy they were there, adding people young and old feel safer and more eager to walk the streets.

He said his fellow airmen still in Iraq should "continue doing what (they're) doing," and that stability will find its way into Iraq "once the (new) government is put in place, for the people and by the people."

MacKenzie served a total of 5½ months in Iraq in two tours of duty.