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RAF pilot foils assassination bid

By thwarting a Taliban attempt to kill an Afghan leader in a helicopter ambush, Chinook pilot has won a valour award

Mark TownsendThe Observer, Sunday 8 March 2009

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A Royal Air Force pilot who foiled an assassination attempt on Britain's most important political ally in [Afghanistan's](#) Helmand province has been officially recognised for his valour. Flight lieutenant Alexander Duncan battled to keep his Chinook helicopter airborne after it was struck by Taliban rockets as he flew the governor of Helmand across the troubled province.

Despite the helicopter losing a hydraulic flight control system and rockets tearing a hole through a rotor blade, Duncan - "Frenchie" to his friends, because of his French mother - managed safely to land Gulab Mangal, a crucial figure in Britain's long-term plan to stabilise Helmand.

Whitehall sources said that ensuring Mangal's safety was paramount to the success of British forces in Helmand - his support for UK forces being instrumental in securing approval for foreign troops among the Afghan population. Mangal's support for UK forces in Helmand and his hardline stance against corruption and the poppy trade have made the governor a prized scalp for the Taliban.

Last week, Duncan was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) for his composure following the ambush on the Chinook as it headed north from Helmand's provincial capital, Lashkar Gah, on its way to meet tribal representatives in the former Taliban stronghold of Musa Qala.

Flying close to the ground, the helicopter encountered a barrage of rocket-propelled grenades and heavy machineguns as it entered the hazardous approach to Musa Qala. As rounds thudded into the fuselage, Duncan experienced an uncontrolled lurch before he managed to stabilise the helicopter and limp back to the forward operating base, the nearest safe landing zone.

Although the incident happened last May, details were only released last week after Duncan was awarded the DFC, an award for airborne gallantry introduced in 1918.

A statement by the Ministry of Defence said the RAF officer had been recognised for his "actions, bravery and stoicism". It added: "Duncan displayed consummate professionalism and strength of character, taking immediate and appropriate action to recover a badly hit aircraft with a VIP party on board."

Since the assassination attempt, Mangal's political influence in Helmand has grown as the fighting in the province shows no sign of abating. Last month he visited the UK to tell Foreign Office officials that reconciliation with the Taliban remained possible despite the intensity of a conflict that has claimed the lives of 149 British service personnel. While in the UK, the governor praised the "courage and sacrifice" of British troops, saying: "If Helmand is not secure, then Britain is not secure."

Since returning, Mangal has resumed negotiations with the region's tribes, Taliban and British forces, while also introducing an anti-corruption ticket with a new helpline for locals to report unscrupulous officials. However, fears remain among military commanders that Mangal, who lives with the constant threat of attack by suicide bombers, remains the target of Taliban fighters.

Six days after helping save Mangal's life, Duncan took part in a night air-assault against Taliban positions that encountered severe resistance. Despite this, Duncan led a pair of Chinooks into the line of fire before returning to lead a second wave of British helicopters towards a landing site, all the while under intense fire.

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