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## RAF pilot wins Distinguished Flying Cross

Michael Smith

AN RAF pilot who saved the life of the Afghan governor of Helmand province by refusing to put his Chinook helicopter down even after a Taliban rocket took out part of its rotor blade has won the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC).

The incident was just one of two within a week of each other for which Flight-Lieutenant Alex "Frenchie" Duncan was awarded the DFC, the air equivalent of the military cross and one of the highest awards for bravery.

The citation notes Duncan's "bravery and stoicism" and says he had "displayed consummate professionalism and strength of character" throughout both incidents.

The 32-year-old pilot, from 27 Squadron, was taking governor Gulab Mangal back from the northern Afghan town of Musa Qala to the provincial capital of Lashkar Gar in May last year.

They were flying extremely low along a dried-up riverbed to avoid detection, when they were hit by a hail of Taliban heavy machine-gun rounds and rocket fire.

"We were flying at 140 knots (160mph) at 20ft," said Duncan this weekend. Allied intelligence had warned that the Taliban knew Mangal would be on board the helicopter "and they were going to try and take us out".

When the flight crew spotted a suspicious vehicle on the ground, Duncan manoeuvred to give the Chinook's machine-gunner a chance to fire at it.

Suddenly, the Chinook jolted to the right and upwards. "I had done nothing to the controls and wondered what had happened," said Duncan. "Then one of the crew shouted: 'We're hit'.

"For a second I thought 'Oh s\*\*\*, we're going in'. Then I tried the controls and they responded. I said 'Right, we're getting out of here'."

Under continuous heavy fire, and with the sound of bullets hitting the helicopter ringing in his ears, Duncan swerved the Chinook up over a ridge, narrowly missing a large radio transmitter mast.

However, the aircraft had a large hole in its rear rotor blade, had lost part of its hydraulic system and part of the automatic flight control system.

"I was going to put us down straight away because I thought we may crash at any second. But we were still in Taliban territory and if I landed we would have been killed by the enemy."

With most of the local population still undecided over who to support in the battle between the allies and the Taliban, killing Mangal would have been a major propaganda coup.

"So I decided to try and carry on," Duncan said. He decided he had no choice but to make the 30-minute flight to the nearest British base, just outside Musa Qala.

"Governor Mangal looked the least worried among our passengers," said Duncan. "I think he had been through a few scrapes before this one."

After they landed, Duncan shut the engine down and he and his co-pilot, Flight-Lieutenant Alex Townsend, took off their helmets and grinned at each other realising how lucky their radio callsign "Black Cat" had been.

At that stage, they were not aware that the rear rotor blade had been hit by a Taliban rocket which had failed to detonate and gone straight through.

"If it had detonated we would have gone down," said Duncan. "All the blood drained away from our faces. I got out and had a look at the back rotar blade and started swearing a great deal."

Mangal thanked him for saving his life. However, six days later Duncan was making two runs through intense rocket and machine-gun fire to deliver reinforcements to British paratroopers engaged in a major battle with the Taliban.

Duncan, who is married with two children, lives in Odiham, Hampshire. His wife Alison, 39, is a civil servant in the Cabinet Office.

He described the second incident as being "like a night in Berlin in World War Two. Everything was going up, rocket-propelled grenades, heavy machine-guns, the lot."

The original plan was to land the reinforcements some way from the battle. "But we thought 'Those soldiers are under fire, they need the extra troops we are bringing now' so we went straight in."

As they took off after the first run, a rocket-propelled grenade narrowly missed the cockpit. "It was so close I could see the purple fizz coming out of the back of it and I instinctively lifted my legs up off the controls," said Duncan.

Unusually, the extent of the machine-gun and rocket fire coming up from the ground led the flight commander to come on the radio and ask: "Black Cat 223, are you OK?"

Duncan said: "I hesitated and then pressed the button and replied 'Shaken not stirred'."

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