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Brave medic Sgt. Julia Bringloe is up for the Distinguished Flying Cross for fighting through injury and gunfire to complete her mission in Afghanistan. *Jay Saucedo for The Daily*



ARMY MEDIC

BRINGLOE

U.S. ARMY



Our heroine

Medevac sarge ignored pain of her own injuries to bravely save lives over and over again

By Erik German



Stuart Ramson/US Army

Bringloe, third from left, with other USO Woman of the Year award recipients last Tuesday.

Dangling from a Black Hawk helicopter, Sgt. Julia Bringloe didn't realize she had broken her leg. The flight medic was too focused on what was happening on the ground, busy helping hoist more than a dozen other soldiers under fire in Afghanistan's rugged Pech River Valley.

For her actions last June, during what would turn out to be an epic 60-hour mission, Bringloe has been nominated for the Distinguished Flying Cross. The medal, which recognizes extraordinary achievement for an aerial flight, has been awarded to only seven women — Amelia Earhart one of them.

Over three days, Bringloe and the other medevac crew members rescued 14 wounded troops, extracted a soldier killed in action and flew three critical resupply missions.

At one point, insurgents fired directly at the

39-year-old Bringloe — hanging 50 feet off the ground on the helo's rescue hook.

"I could hear bullets flying past my head," she told The Daily. "It got pretty crazy."

For all but one of the rescues, Bringloe was dodging gunfire, binding wounds and hoisting soldiers to safety. She ignored her own throbbing pain.

Bringloe hurt her leg June 25 as her crew's helicopter hovered in gathering darkness above a mud house perched on a steep valley wall. Inside, a soldier was severely dehydrated, possibly suffering altitude sickness. Any soldier unable to hike at altitude put the whole unit in danger, so a medevac was critical.

Ten stories below the aircraft, Bringloe and her patient dangled on a hook-like seat. Slowly, the helicopter reeled them in, raising them



through the thick forest. Suddenly the hook swung dangerously close to a tree. Just before her patient bashed into the trunk, Bringloe lifted her left leg to cushion the blow. She took it on her shin and calf.

When the crew dropped the wounded soldier off at a base in Asadabad, Bringloe went with him to the medical station.

“She was limping,” recalled Chief Warrant Officer Erik Sabiston, one of the pilots. “The doctor thought she was one of the wounded.”

The scabs and purple marks came later.

“We could see her legs were just black with bruises,” Sabiston said. “It looked like she’d been beat.”

With all the ghastly injuries she witnessed on the mission, Bringloe thinks all the attention on her broken leg is overblown.

“It was really just a tiny fracture,” Bringloe said, adding the cracked bone wasn’t discovered

until doctors X-rayed her leg weeks later.

As Bringloe stepped back to the helo, Sabiston asked: “Do you want to quit?”

She refused.

“I never thought it was an option, really,” Bringloe said. “I was the only medic in the valley and it was a huge mission.”

Operation Hammer Down began as an offensive to clear insurgent training camps near the Pech River Valley. It dissolved into a multi-day, multi-casualty firefight that left troops desperately needing medical attention.

Tending the wounded is draining, physically and emotionally, but it’s the job that drew Bringloe to the Army in the first place. Before enlisting, she had been a construction contractor in Seattle and Hawaii, where her son, John, 12, still lives with her estranged husband.

“She wants to be patching up holes in people, not putting holes in people,” said her brother,



Courtesy photo

Rescuing hurt soldiers by dangling from a Black Hawk helicopter is one of the most dangerous extraction methods.



Jack, 43, of Bainbridge Island, Wash., the small city outside Seattle is where Bringloe developed her physical toughness early on, swimming competitively in school and practicing judo.

Of the seven known female recipients of the Distinguished Flying Cross, as few as three received theirs for combat flights. The exact number isn't certain because no complete list of recipients is maintained, according to the Distinguished Flying Cross Society.

Last June, after hours of close calls under fire, the Black Hawk crew was ordered back to the spot where Bringloe had smashed her leg. An Afghan translator killed in action had to be lifted out before soldiers in the house could move.

Bullets whizzed across the landing zone as soldiers exchanged fire with insurgents, some perched on a ridge about 70 feet above the house. The Black Hawk hovered nearly at eye level with the enemy, Sabiston said, lowering Bringloe into gunfire in the landing zone.

"As soon as she hit the ground she was in a no-lie, real-deal firefight," Sabiston said.

Circling nearby, an attack helicopter pilot radioed the Black Hawk crew and said, "Medevac, you guys are crazy."

On the ground, a pair of soldiers crouched with Bringloe, helping hook the dead translator to the hoist. Other troops, prone, fired back at the insurgents. Once the body was ready to go, amid the deafening gunfire, Bringloe somehow forgot to duck.

Describing the moment, Bringloe adopts a self-mocking tone.

"Somehow I think I'm impervious to bullets or something," she said. "Finally one of the ground troops knocked me on the shoulder and said, 'You might want to lay down with us.'"

With the body aboard the helo, Bringloe's turn came on the hoist. As she rose toward the



Amelia Earhart is one of only seven women to earn the Distinguished Flying Cross.

AP Photo

helicopter, the insurgents on the ridgeline took aim at her. The high-pitched zip of rounds close by her head sounded to Bringloe like "a kind of whistling."

The soldiers on the ground radioed up: "They're shooting at your medic! Get out of here!" Sabiston said.

But changing position before Bringloe cleared the treetops would risk slamming her into branches again. So the helo hovered as the hoist hook steadily rose.

"For about 15 seconds — I remember this because I wrote it down — those six dudes popped up and fired at her," Sabiston said. "And none of them hit her."

In those seconds, Sabiston's co-pilot, Chief Warrant Officer Kenneth Brodhead, grabbed an



M-4, chambered a round and pointed the rifle out the window in desperate bid to return fire. It was hardly standard pilot procedure, and it's hard to know whether it helped, Bringloe said.

"I thought it was pretty funny though," she said. "I love that guy."

After Bringloe safely rejoined her crewmates, they took a few hours of sleepless rest. The toughest flight was yet to come. A call came in for a supply drop and medevac for a group of soldiers dug into a ridge nearly 10,000 feet above sea level. At that altitude, the Black Hawk's rotor blades would find little purchase in the thin air.

**"Somehow I think I'm impervious to bullets or something."
- Sgt. Julia Bringloe**

Perhaps worse, dense clouds veiled the ridge. The crew nearly called off the mission before finding a tiny fissure in the gray and punching through. A patch of rocky ground was just visible in the landing zone. But soon after Bringloe hit the ground to get the patient — a soldier who'd been shot in the shoulder — the mist thickened.

"All of the sudden, Kenny looks out the window and says, 'I'm losing my references,'" Sabiston said. "My crew chief looked down and he could only see the cable going into a cloud."

At the end of the wire, Bringloe looked up and saw the hoist cable similarly vanish into the wet gray above. Some helicopters under some circumstances can fly in clouds, using only instruments to guide them. The crew of Dust Off 73 may be the first ever to do so inadvertently, in combat, while dangling two people from a res-

cue hoist.

Clipped onto the hook, Bringloe wrapped her patient in a full-body bear hug and said, "Hang on!"

The pilots climbed about 800 feet per minute, Sabiston said, picking up speed and flying blind, watching only the instruments on a console beside their control sticks.

"It's like driving a car a hundred miles an hour and all you can look at is your speedometer," Sabiston said. "We had to make sure we didn't slide into a mountain sideways."

A few minutes into the flight, with Bringloe and her patient safely aboard, Sabiston finally spotted a hole in the clouds to his left. The helicopter dived toward daylight, and the crew was able to fly safely to base.

Sabiston and Brodhead are also recommended for Distinguished Flying Crosses and the crew chief, Spec. David Capps, is recommended for an Air Medal with Valor.

In a statement she wrote later, Bringloe declined credit for her rescues, or for surviving them.

"There is no doubt in my mind," she said, "that I owe my life to the competence and sheer determination of my crew." ■

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