

HEROES

In the War on Terror

Each week the Defense Dept. highlights the military men and women who have gone above and beyond in the global war on terror.



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Marine Corps Maj. William D. Chesarek Jr.

For the troops serving in Iraq or Afghanistan, interacting with forces from other nations is a workaday event, even in heavy combat situations. It's not as common, however, for foreign governments to bestow awards on Americans – except for extraordinary bravery, such as that displayed by Maj. Chesarek on June 10, 2006.

On that day, Chesarek and his crew were preparing to support approximately 100 British marines on a weapons-cache search in the city of Amarah, Iraq. Chesarek, a seasoned pilot, was no stranger to the Brits: He had served as an exchange officer with U.K. forces in Somerset, England, and deployed with his British comrades to Basra.

As the group completed its mission in Amarah, one of its vehicles on the ground became disabled. Chesarek, listening to radio transmissions, heard the dispatches grow desperate as the immobilized vehicle was swarmed by armed insurgents. Chesarek flew into the fight, but as his flight team began searching for insurgents to fire at from above, they noticed numerous civilians in the vicinity, making it almost impossible for the helicopter to safely attack. Chesarek made a daring choice: he dove into the gun battle, flying as low as possible to draw the enemy's attention away from the troops on the ground. The tactic worked – even as it endangered Chesarek's helicopter.

As the battle continued, a British marine was shot in the head and fell in the middle of the firefight. Ignoring imminent danger, Chesarek landed his helicopter in the crossfire and evacuated the injured marine.

For his life-saving actions, Chesarek was awarded the British Distinguished Flying Cross on March 21, 2007 – the first time an American serviceman has received the award since World War II. Marine Corps [story](#); Stars and Stripes [story](#).

Army Special Forces Staff Sgt. Jonathan A. Zapien

It is sometimes forgotten that the expression "brother-at-arms" is one that transcends national boundaries; that worthy causes of great consequence inevitably bridge cultural divides. For no one is that more true than for soldiers fighting through life and death situations on a daily basis. For Staff Sgt. Zapien, his dedication to his German brothers-at-arms earned him Germany's Ehrenmedaille, or "honor medal," the highest award the German army can give to a foreign soldier. The Ehrenmedaille was presented by the German minister of defense and marked the first time German Special Forces has given an award to a foreign soldier.

Zapien, a member of the U.S. Army's 3rd Special Forces Group, was attached to the German Special Forces Command operating in Afghanistan from June to October 2005. While there, he acted as a liaison between the German unit and other Coalition forces in the region – and he filled many other roles for the unit, whether during regular patrols or while directing air, medical, and communications support during combat operations.

Oftentimes, the unit was called upon to conduct sensitive and dangerous missions; however, the team also took part in country-building operations, such as providing security during Afghanistan's parliamentary elections. During one incident, the team was out on a combat reconnaissance mission in eastern Afghanistan when they were hit with an IED attack, severely injuring one of the German soldiers. Zapien quickly called in air and ground medical support, which saved the German soldier's life. One German general said that Zapien played a critical role on a decisive team, "display[ing] exemplary dedication and an exceptional sense of duty." The general added that he is "a sensational warrior with a very soldier-like attitude."

For his support and actions, the German Special Forces Command presented Zapien the Ehrenmedaille on Sept. 12, 2006. Army [story](#); Stars and Stripes [story](#).



Newport, R.I.
*British Distinguished Flying
Cross recipient*



Houston, Texas
*Germany's Ehrenmedaille
recipient*