

# NCO awarded Silver Star for courage under fire in Afghanistan

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By Capt. Joseph Sanfilippo, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment



**Photo Credit: Capt. Joseph Sanfilippo, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment.**

*Staff Sgt. Conrad Begaye stands before rows of fellow Soldiers from 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, during a ceremony on June 30, 2009. Begaye was awarded the Silver Star for his valorous actions during an enemy ambush Nov. 9, 2007, in the Nuristan Province of Afghanistan.*

VICENZA, Italy -- Rows of Soldiers from 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, stood at attention as the U.S. Army recognized Staff Sgt. Conrad Begaye for bravery under fire in Afghanistan.

During a June 30 ceremony at Caserma Ederle's Hoekstra Field, Maj. Gen. William B. Garrett III, commander of U.S. Army Africa, fastened the Silver Star to Begaye's uniform - recognition for his leadership and valor during an enemy ambush Nov. 9, 2007, in Nuristan Province.

"There are people who have passed on that deserve this," Begaye said. "There were five men who died. I'll accept and wear it in honor of them, not for my actions, but for theirs."

Begaye said he would have preferred a simple handshake or a pat on the back. After all, infantrymen don't fight for medals, they fight for each other. That's why Begaye felt grateful to have Soldiers from his unit, Chosen Company, behind him on the parade field during the ceremony.

"What happened there is something I think about every day, it's not easy to forget about," Begaye said, recalling events of that day.

Begaye's unit had just met with local Afghan leaders. They were hiking eastward along a small path on rugged terrain when his squad, his platoon's headquarters sections and a squad of Afghan National Army Soldiers, began taking fire from enemy positions above.

Pinned down at first, Begaye was struck in the arm while returning fire and directing his

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men. Begaye bound over a cliff, calling to his troops to follow him down the rocky slope to find cover.

He kept his composure against overwhelming odds, directing and encouraging his fellow Soldiers under heavy fire. One paratrooper had been shot in both legs and was still taking fire. Begaye called out to him to play dead, knowing the enemy would shift their fire away if they thought the Soldier was killed -- quick thinking that likely helped save that Soldier's life.

Ignoring his own injuries, Begaye moved a wounded Soldier to a nearby cave to protect him from enemy fire. Using a radio, he called his higher headquarters and directed mortar fire onto enemy positions - essentially ending the battle. Then he motivated a Soldier to organize a defensive perimeter of Afghan Soldiers to prevent their unit from being harassed or overrun.

Twenty-one months later, with his comrades standing quietly on the parade ground behind him, Begaye listened as Garrett spoke.

"Today, we honor a noncommissioned officer whose bold actions turned the tide of battle and saved the day...whose courage under fire and fierce loyalty to his men still astounds us all," Garrett said.

"Outnumbered, wounded, and initially pinned down in the kill zone of an enemy ambush -- he didn't hesitate to leap forward, literally, and take charge of the fight."

Garrett spoke of the "warrior ethos," ideas that guide Soldiers -- placing the mission first, never accepting defeat and never quitting, never leaving a fallen comrade.

"These are just words to some people," Garrett said. "But the warrior ethos is a way of life to Staff Sergeant Begaye," Garrett said. "Amazing acts of bravery and valor were commonplace that grim day. But this morning, we recognize Staff Sergeant Begaye for his courage - and we are thankful for the opportunity to serve with such a man."

After the ceremony, Begaye's wife, U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Idellia Beletso, a flight medic based at Aviano, hugged her husband. Hundreds of red-bereted paratroopers lined up to shake Begaye's hand, many who served with him while in harm's way.

Begaye, a Navajo from Black Canyon City, Ariz., enlisted in the infantry 10 years ago. An airborne ranger, Begaye arrived in Vicenza in 2003. He deployed for year-long tours with Chosen Company to Iraq in 2003 and Afghanistan in 2005. In 2007, he deployed to Afghanistan's Nuristan Province with Chosen.

For younger Soldiers, Begaye hopes his story helps them understand the importance of training, leadership and motivation, he said, and a sense of reality of war for troops eager to see combat.

"It should open their eyes. A firefight is a life-altering experience - one that I'm still living through," Begaye said. "Soldiers should understand...this is real life and people do die."