

EVAC EXCELLENCE

C-17 pilot selected for Sullenberger Award for Courage

Lt. Col. Alexander Pelbath '01 is the first-ever recipient of the Sullenberger Award for Courage.

The award is named in honor of Ambassador Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger '73, the retired US Airways captain who saved 155 lives on Flight 1549 in 2009 — dubbed the "Miracle on the Hudson."

The new honor is presented to an Air Force Academy graduate who distinguishes himself or herself through a series of events or a singular act of bravery in the military, civilian world, business sector or local community in a calendar year. The honor is presented jointly by the Air Force Academy and the USAFA Association of Graduates, in cooperation with Ambassador Sullenberger.

Lt. Col. Pelbath was alerted to his selection by a surprise phone call from Ambassador Sullenberger. At first, Lt. Col. Pelbath couldn't focus on the message behind the call.

"I was talking to Sully Sullenberger," he laughs. "It took me a few moments to get past that. I was blown away just to have the opportunity to speak with him, and I was a little starstruck."

When the news of the honor began to sink in, Lt. Col. Pelbath says he was incredibly honored to be the inaugural Award for Courage honoree.

"It's awesome to be tied to Sully Sullenberger in some way," he admits. "What he did 13 years ago is still one of the greatest aviation feats the world has ever seen."



During the closing ceremony for this year's National Character and Leadership Symposium, Lt. Col. Alex Pelbath '01 (right) accepts the Sullenberger Award for Courage from Ambassador Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger '73 in Arnold Hall. (Photo by Katie Sharkey)

“We had hundreds of aircrew members involved in the operation, all of whom found themselves in challenging situations. I was just the coach, but I had a lot of great players out on the field. They are all equally deserving of the award.” —Lt. Col. Alexander Pelbath '01



C-17 SUPER BOWL

As director of C-17 Special Operations for the 437th Operations Group at Charleston Air Force Base in South

Carolina, Lt. Col. Pelbath led the final mission to withdraw U.S. forces out of Kabul, Afghanistan. His was also the last aircraft off the ground on Aug. 31, 2021, ending the United States' long-running conflict in Afghanistan.

“That image at night of four C-17s in front of me as we were rolling down the runway to leave there after 20 years is an image that will stick with me forever,” he recalls. “Closing it out ... I was proud to be a part of it. If you're a C-17 aircrew member, this was like our Super Bowl.”

Lt. Col. Pelbath and his team were part of the Afghan evacuation from day one, and his leadership and bravery significantly contributed to the successful evacuation of an estimated 124,000 Afghan refugees, 79,000 of whom were airlifted on C-17s out of Kabul in August 2021. It was ultimately the largest air evacuation in history.

Two weeks prior to the final mission, his C-17 delivered ground forces to help secure Hamid Karzai International Air-

port (HKIA) as Kabul fell to the Taliban.

But as he prepared to leave HKIA, Lt. Col. Pelbath was asked if his plane could transport a few outbound passengers.

“We were not expecting to be taking any folks out,” he says. “We filled up our aircraft with Afghan evacuees, which I believe was the first evacuation lift. It was unplanned and unexpected.”

In the ensuing hours, the airport was overrun with Afghans hoping to leave the country.

“Things got really challenging,” he recalls. Eventually order was restored to the airport and the evacuation continued.

During Operation Allies Refuge (OAR), Lt. Col. Pelbath personally led 18 missions into and out of Kabul, Afghanistan. On one particular mission, a suspected suicide bomber allegedly made it onto Pelbath's aircraft. After a complete search of refugees onboard, the bomber wasn't identified and the mission continued.

Just weeks earlier, Lt. Col. Pelbath had directed the evacuation of Bagram Air Base, the largest airport in Afghanistan. The difficult task was completed with such precision that local forces didn't know the Americans had left until a day later.

AWARD SELECTION

Ambassador Sullenberger says that Pelbath is a worthy first recipient of the Award for Courage.

“Lt. Col. Alex Pelbath faced a dangerous and ambiguous situation and, rising beyond duty, quickly made critical decisions under great pressure to preserve countless lives,” he says. “He is unimpeachably worthy, and he has my heartiest congratulations.”

While thrilled that the massive Afghanistan noncombatant evacuation operation is being recognized, Lt. Col. Pelbath says he doesn't deserve to be singled out for this honor. ▶

PREVIOUS PAGE: Lt. Col. Alexander Pelbath '01 (center) and his crew were on the last airplane out of Kabul on Aug. 31, 2021. (Submitted photos)

RIGHT: Lt. Col. Alexander Pelbath is pictured in the cockpit of his C-17 during the Kabul operation.

BELOW: Lt. Col. Alexander Pelbath poses for a photo with his family.

“We had hundreds of aircrew members involved in the operation, all of whom found themselves in challenging situations,” he says. “I was just the coach, but I had a lot of great players out on the field. They are all equally deserving of the award.”

As the largest airlift evacuation in history, the operation was nearly flawless and is worthy of praise, Lt. Col. Pelbath says.

“It worked because we are really good at our jobs and we were well prepared,” he says. “I am proud to accept this honor on behalf of the five aircrew who executed that final mission and the hundreds of airmen — and many USAFA grads — who took part in OAR.”

Lt. Col. Pelbath officially received the Sullenberger Award for Courage during the closing ceremony of USAFA’s National Character & Leadership Symposium on Feb. 25, 2022.

NEW AWARD

The Association of Graduates Board of Directors has been working to establish the Award for Courage for a couple years. Board member Kathleen Rock reached out to Ambassador Sullenberger to see if he’d participate.

Ambassador Sullenberger says he is honored to have the award named after him. He hopes the special honor eventually reaches the stature of the annual Jabara Award for Airmanship, given to a USAFA graduate whose accomplishments demonstrate superior performance in aerospace.



“I certainly know how important the Jabara Award is to everyone who knows about it,” Ambassador Sullenberger says. “By selecting deserving recipients, I hope this award can make known heroic acts as exemplars and remind us of the potential we all have to meet the moment.”

Such uncommon courage, he adds, is a trait that sets our nation’s military apart from many others.

“Each time Lorrie and I visit a military base or hospital and meet and talk to the young men and women who have volunteered to serve a cause greater than themselves, as we leave, we turn to each other and say that this nation is in good hands,” he says. 