

# Black Hawk pilot saved lives, earned DFC

By Stephen Speckman - [Deseret Morning News](#), Posted : Sunday Sep 23, 2007 16:04:41 EDT

WEST JORDAN, Utah — It was about 11 a.m. Feb. 21 in Iraq when Black Hawk helicopter pilot Scott Upton earned his Distinguished Flying Cross while possibly saving nine lives, including his own, in what the 22-year military veteran called a “controlled crash.” Upton, 42, a chief warrant officer in the Utah Army National Guard, called his wife, Barbie, and four children on the same day. He wanted to tell his wife everything, but he wasn’t sure how much he should say. “I just told her, ‘I got shot down,’” he said. “She goes, ‘What?’”

After learning that he was OK, Barbie asked why he wasn’t sent home. Back inside his office at the Utah Army National Guard base recently, Upton said it doesn’t work that way. In fact, he was flying again in a week, about seven months into a full year’s deployment in Iraq.

He also called his mother, Jeffie Upton, in his home state of Alabama on crash day. It was the same drill with Jeffie Upton, who in the 1950s was a member of the Navy’s Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, the WAVES. That experience taught her that if there was something wrong with her son, he wouldn’t be able to say much over the phone while he was still in Iraq for fear their conversation might be overheard by the enemy. Later he wrote her a letter and sent a few photos, explaining everything to his mother. Upton’s father, James Upton, who was also in the Navy when he met Jeffie, died about four years ago. What Upton didn’t talk about on the phone last February became the reason a general pinned the Distinguished Flying Cross on Upton’s uniform in July while he was in Balad, a few weeks before coming home to Clinton.

Upton is an instructor pilot and has been flying since 1993, about three years after he transferred from the Air Force to the Guard. By that time he had years of experience as a mechanic working on helicopters. In terms of knowing his aircraft inside and out, “reliable” is a word that comes to mind when describing Upton’s expertise in the air and on the ground. As a pilot he has been to Singapore, Kuwait (after the Persian Gulf War), Nicaragua and Iraq. Before crash day, Upton’s chopper had been hit once by a single bullet while on a night mission, but it wasn’t fatal to the aircraft’s ability to fly.

It was before noon in February when Upton and the pilot of a second Blackhawk were transporting troops from one forward operating base to another. They were on their way to Taji, about 20 miles north of Baghdad. It was daylight when Upton saw a “fireball” flying into his chopper, known as No. 503 among Utah’s cache of Black Hawks.

The impact on the chopper’s fuselage, Upton said, “felt like someone punched the whole aircraft on the side.” His left door gunner, Brian Carver, instantly returned fire. Upton’s crew could see at least one vehicle and the source of enemy fire coming from the barren landscape. Upton dropped 503 to about 30 feet off the ground at a speed of about 150 mph, trying to make himself less of a target. Upton asked for a damage assessment, and the news coming back from pilot Lloyd Nelson was good. Everything was running fine at the time and everyone, including crew chief Joe Bass, was OK.

The chopper, however, had been hit four times. He learned how bad the damage was when he tried to turn the aircraft after flying for about a full minute, which put the Blackhawk about three miles away from where it was hit. He thought about flying back to Balad. “I heard a loud boom,” Upton said. The chopper’s nose dipped and pulled to the right, still traveling at about 150 mph. About 300 feet away, Lance Robb, pilot of the second Black Hawk helping with the troop movement mission that day, saw what was happening. “I knew that I had a tail rotor problem,” Upton said. In short, the tail rotor “disintegrated” in the air. “It was, ‘Brace for impact,’” he thought to himself.

But there was a berm. He came in tail first, slamming to the ground as he slid about 100 feet. The berm ripped off the left tire, and the chopper rolled onto its side not far from a house. People in the area moved in. From three miles away, the enemy would have been able to see that one of their targets was down. They would be coming soon. Upton heard gunshots. “I’m thinking the enemy is coming,” he said. He climbed out with his semiautomatic rifle ready. But the fire came from Chock 2, the second Blackhawk that now sent out warning shots for Iraqis moving to the crash site. So the Iraqis stayed away. Upton and his crew emptied the broken Blackhawk of equipment and “sensitive” items while they secured a perimeter around the helicopter with guns drawn.

Two OH-58D Kiowa Warrior gunships flew in within minutes after Wyatt Smith in Robb's chopper radioed about a chopper down. The gunships allowed Robb to land his Black Hawk and cram aboard Upton, his crew and passengers, stacked like cordwood inside. Within about five minutes, or what "seemed like forever," Robb's helicopter arrived safely in Taji. Two Apache helicopters also rushed to the crash scene. A quick reaction force was there in 30 minutes, surrounded by a Bradley fighting vehicle, a Humvee, the four armed helicopters and several ground troops. Upton figures that within 12 hours of the crash, his battered Black Hawk was on a flatbed truck and back in Balad. From there, he's not sure what became of it.

Capt. Micah Tebbs applied for the medal on Upton's behalf. Upton received the award during his deployment, but the more important ceremony, Tebbs said, will be the one where he is recognized in front of family and friends. Tebbs was Alpha Company, 2nd Battalion, 211th Aviation's commander in Iraq during the group's deployment through August 2007. During that time, Tebbs' 48 charges, which included 20 pilots, flew more than 6,200 combat flight hours, conducting 111 air assault operations and more than 700 missions. They performed some of the most difficult aviation missions that a Blackhawk company can perform and they did them well," Tebbs said.

Upton's Flying Cross is housed in a box in a building separate from his office. The ceremonial presentation of the award is expected in December.