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By David Bedard

*176th Wing Public Affairs*

## **Airmen of 176th Wing nearly sweep Lance P. Sijan awards**

**JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska** — Airmen of 176th Wing nearly swept the 2020 Lance P. Sijan Leadership Award slate, taking three of four categories at the National Guard Bureau level.

Lt. Col. Jessica Pisano, 176th Maintenance Squadron commander, won the senior officer category; Capt. Matthew Soukup, 211th Rescue Squadron HC-130J Combat King II aircraft commander, won the junior officer category; and Master Sgt. Gary Keller, 176th Security Forces squad leader, won the senior NCO category.

The award recognizes the accomplishments of officers and noncommissioned officers who demonstrate the highest qualities of leadership in the performance of their duties and conduct of their lives.

Captain Sijan was a 1965 Air Force Academy graduate and F-4 Phantom II pilot who was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his courage while evading capture by the North Vietnamese and during his subsequent captivity as a prisoner of war.

According to Jessica Hair, NGB A-1 (Personnel) program manager for awards, as far as she knows, this is the first time a single Air National Guard wing has nearly swept the awards.

According to the nomination, as acting 176th MXS commander for four months before officially taking command, Pisano was responsible for providing maintenance support and generating 2,200 sorties comprising 8,000 flying hours, hauling more than 3,000 tons and moving more than 2,500 personnel, delivering 44 percent of the strategic airlift for U.S. Indo-Pacific Command.

Pisano enabled the nation's busiest combat search and rescue fleet in support of Operation Noble Eagle and supported statewide civil search and rescue with 108 sorties comprising 215 hours with 76 lives saved.

Pisano's leadership was instrumental to the generation of 10 C-17 Globemaster III special air missions for President Donald Trump, facilitating travel to the Koreas for nuclear non-proliferation negotiations with North Korea.

She deployed to the Horn of Africa in support of Operation Octave Shield where she supervised 51 maintenance Airmen supporting more than \$125 million of equipment providing personnel recovery and casualty evacuation for an area of operations spanning millions of square miles.

As a volunteer, Pisano served as the vice president of the 176th Wing Squadron Commanders' Council, mentoring 16 squadron commanders. She helped build cabins for the non-profit Battle Dawgs Wounded Warrior Camp, helping at least 20 wounded veterans.

According to Soukup's nomination, he flew in support of Operation Inherent Resolve fighting ISIS, holding 350 alert hours and logged 50 combat hours, guaranteeing a persistent combat search and rescue presence throughout the region.

During Soukup's 34 combat sorties, he flew 348 personnel and moved 51,000 pounds of cargo while providing personnel recovery coverage for 5,000 allied service members.

Notably, he flew the first combat medical evacuation for the unit, saving a life and demonstrating enhanced personnel recovery capabilities for the area of operations.

Soukup executed a complex aerial evacuation with minimal warning before an Iranian theater ballistic missile attack on the base, saving dozens of service members from the attack.

As a volunteer, Soukup served more than 1,000 meals in four days to the local community during COVID 19. He also fostered the future of aviation by providing flight instruction to the Cook Inlet Tribal Council Youth Employment Program.

According to Keller's nomination, while deployed to Afghanistan he established improved procedures for eight Kandahar Airfield defense areas, improving fortifications and increasing defensive posture by 100 percent. Keller revamped the contracting office representative program, reworking two one-year \$43.5 million contracts for a private security contractor comprising more than 100 security personnel.

Keller developed standard operating procedures for the transfer of equipment to the Afghan National Army, and he secured movement by a Romanian government agency for allied equipment.

He reacted to three rocket attacks and led the base quick reaction force, clearing several taxiways and hundreds of aircraft, protecting 10,000 allied personnel and \$3.5 billion in assets.

Keller led 2019 Defender Ace annual training exercise, logging more than 9,000 training hours preparing 176th SFS to defeat near-peer threats.

During his deployment, Keller volunteered scarce off-duty hours to augment the chaplaincy, helping to ensure religious support for more than 1,200 Airmen.

Col. Anthony Stratton, 176th Wing commander, said he is proud three wing Airmen earned the exclusive leadership award at the national level, but he isn't surprised.

"Their record of service and dedication to excellence speak for themselves," he said. "These three Airmen exemplify the Alaska National Guard ethos of 'Always ready, always there, always have been,

and always will be,' and their unequalled service to that motto made for the unprecedented result of nearly running the board.”

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## PHOTOS

1. **Attached pdf** includes story and a small selection of low-resolution photos for viewing on screen.
2. **DVIDS link** includes selected full-resolution photos. (Accessible from military computers.)  
<https://www.dvidshub.net/news/382392/airmen-176th-wing-nearly-sweep-lance-p-sijan-awards>



Alaska Air National Guard Lt. Col. Jessica Pisano takes command of 176th Maintenance Squadron during a July 12, 2019, ceremony at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska. Pisano earned honors as the National Guard Bureau's 2020 Lance P. Sijan Leadership Award senior officer category.. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by David Bedard/Released)



Alaska Air National Guard Capt. Matthew Soukup, a pilot with the 176th Wing's 211th Rescue Squadron, searches for isolated flood survivors aboard an HC-130J Combat King II aircraft while assisting with hurricane relief operations in North Carolina, Sept. 17, 2018. Soukup earned honors as the National Guard Bureau's 2020 Lance P. Sijan Leadership Award junior officer category. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Balinda O'Neal Dresel/Released)



Alaska Air National Guard Master Sgt. Gary Keller, 176th Security Forces Squadron squad leader, secures his luggage at Ted Stevens-Anchorage International Airport upon his return from Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan, June 22, 2020. Keller earned honors as the National Guard Bureau's 2020 Lance P. Sijan Leadership Award senior noncommissioned officer category. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Lt. Col. Candis Olmstead/Released)