

Aid to local cop nets sergeant meeting with the president

BY JENNIFERE WEST
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"I've got a thousand hobbies—falconry, photography, mountain biking, flyfishing..." said Staff Sgt. David J. Biddinger. Add a couple more—saving a cop's life and meeting the president of the United States during a trip to Albuquerque.

Sergeant Biddinger, a pararescueman with the National Assessment Group at Kirtland AFB, stood at attention with Col. Hank Andrews, 377th Air Base Wing commander, to meet President George W. Bush on his arrival here Aug. 26, during a whirlwind three-city visit to New Mexico.

Sergeant Biddinger's enviable spot to greet his commander in chief was the result of his "above and beyond" action that helped save the life of an Albuquerque law enforcement officer who was shot in the head. His actions, which earned him the Airman's Medal, a decoration given to members of the armed forces who perform heroically, usually at the voluntary risk of life although not in actual combat.

Sergeant Biddinger and his then-fiancee Teresa raced to the aid of Albuquerque Police Sergeant Carol Oleksak, whom they saw struck and shot as they passed in their vehicle. Their decision to turn back to help the officer put them directly in the line of danger of the armed transient who harmed the officer.

While the sergeant's efforts, performing emergency medical care on the critically injured Sergeant Oleksak, earned him APD's highest civilian medal, the Airman's Medal and the chance to greet the president, Sergeant Biddinger said in his mind, Teresa, now his wife and mother of their three-month-old, shares the glory as well for her part in aiding the downed police officer, calling 911 and giving a description of the offender and being in danger as well.

What does a staff sergeant talk about with the highest ranking official of the country?

Not a lot, really. There's little time for much other than 'yes, Mr. President' or 'thank you, Mr. President.'

"He said 'Thanks for doing such a great job,'" Sergeant Biddinger explained about the greeting.

Knowing the president frequently has PJs protecting him while running, Sergeant Biddinger wanted to give President Bush a PJ coin on behalf of all the Kirtland AFB pararescuemen to express their pride and honor to serve their president and country.

"I said, 'I know this isn't the first time a PJ has given you a coin,'" Sergeant Biddinger admitted. But the president "recognized the career field and asked if I'd been to the ranch yet."

"No?" the president responded. "Well," the president told him, "maybe we could do something about that." Unfortunately, the sergeant's impending transfer is likely to prevent that opportunity and is in a low-profile area of work that won't likely yield future meetings with presidents. "But it'd be great if he'd request me by name to run with him."

Sergeant Biddinger was a little edgy with anticipation of meeting the president. "I was at attention until he came up and took my hand and then I started to relax a little bit. It was pretty quick.

"Talking with him felt like I was talking with just a normal guy...he's in a button-down shirt and no tie," Sergeant Biddinger noted. "I was respectful but at the same time I felt comfortable. I'd heard he's pretty mellow..."

"I thought about (meeting the president) the whole night before...I'm meeting the commander in chief and pretty much the

leader of the free world. I was thinking about the fact that...usually I'm thinking about my next jump, a report to get out. My day-to-day activities compared to his—I worry about my next jump or my next training event, pararescue stuff, and he's worried about world events and whether or not 10 more soldiers got killed in Fallujah. How different his worries are compared to mine, how much responsibility he has compared to me...that's just an amazing responsibility to have to be the leader of so many people and make such important decisions. And he takes time out, here I am meeting him. That doesn't happen every day."

Were there any surprises for Sergeant Biddinger meeting President Bush? "One of the things that struck me, he was a lot taller than I thought. He's as tall as I am. He's at least six feet tall."

Any parting words? "Keep up the good work," the president said.

Sergeant Biddinger is a 14-year member of the Air Force and has served as a Reservist and instructor of pararescuemen. After rejoining as active duty, he served six years as a PJ since 1998.



RIGHT: Hundreds of Airmen from units across Kirtland AFB wait to see President Bush during his visit here.

BELOW: Andy Lenderman, a reporter with Albuquerque Journal, interviews Staff Sgt. David Biddinger, a Kirtland AFB pararescueman, as Deborah Mercurio, 377th Air Base Wing Public Affairs director, stands nearby.

Photo by Todd Berenger



Photo by Staff Sgt. Markus Maier



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President George W. Bush (foreground) and Rudy Giuliani, former New York mayor, depart Air Force One during their visit here Aug. 26.

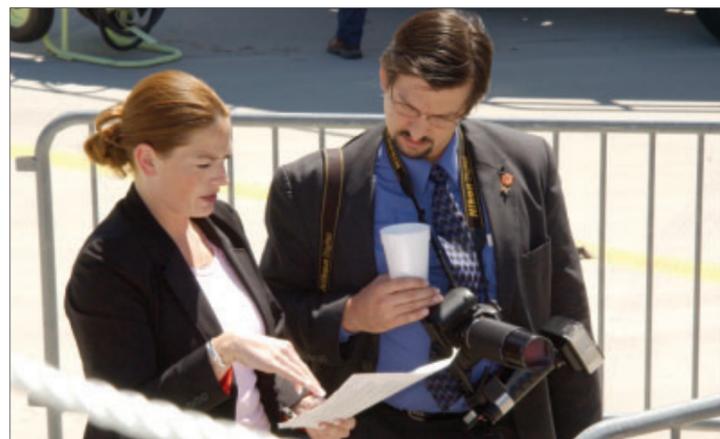


Photo by Staff Sgt. Markus Maier

ABOVE: Molly Zurflueh, a White House Press Staff member, talks to a reporter about the president's schedule.



Photo by Staff Sgt. Markus Maier

RIGHT: President Bush poses with Bernice Young, as former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani watches. President Bush met with Mrs. Young because of her dedicated involvement in the USA Freedom Corps. Over the past 13 years, Mrs. Young has volunteered more than 11,000 hours at the Children's Hospital of New Mexico.



Photo by Staff Sgt. Markus Maier

LEFT: Air Force videographers Adam Gramarossa (foreground) and Brian Lambert, 377th Communication Division, tape the day's events during the president's visit on Kirtland AFB.