



## **SAGE KIMZEY IS RUNNING FOR AIR FORCE STAFF SGT. DYLAN J. ELCHIN**

BEAVER, Pa. — Aaron Elchin last spoke to his brother, Air Force Staff Sgt. Dylan J. Elchin, Saturday via Facetime from Afghanistan.

It was the perfect time to reach out to Sgt. Elchin, who had deployed in August, because the family had gathered the weekend after Thanksgiving.

Sgt. Elchin, at 25 a young, yet highly decorated airman from Beaver County, told his family he was preparing for a week-long mission. Mr. Elchin told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette that he said he asked his brother to text or call when he returned, knowing that the sergeant would be without cell phone service while in the field.

“And I told him that I love him,” said Mr. Elchin, 28, of Cincinnati. “And I didn’t know that was going to be the last time I’d talk to him.”

Sgt. Elchin, of Raccoon Township, a graduate of Hopewell High School, was one of three service men killed Tuesday when their vehicle was destroyed by an improvised explosive device in Andar, Ghazni Province.

The sergeant was assigned to the 26th Special Tactics Squadron at Cannon Air Force Base in New Mexico. The 26th is part of the 720th Special Tactics Group, 24th Special Operations Wing, the only special tactics wing in the Air Force.

Sgt. Elchin had been embedded with a U.S. Army Special Operations Force Operational Detachment-Alpha team, according to the Air Force. His role included advising the ground force commander, directing close-air support aircraft, and delivering destructive ordnance on enemy targets in support of offensive operations, the Air Force said.

The two other soldiers who died — Army Capt. Andrew Patrick Ross, 29, of Lexington, Virginia, and Army Sgt. 1st Class Eric Michael Emond, 39, of Brush Prairie, Washington — were assigned to the 1st Battalion, 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne), out of Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

They were in Afghanistan to support Operation Freedom's Sentinel. The Taliban claimed responsibility, saying a U.S. tank was destroyed. The military said three other service members as well as an American contractor were injured.





As a special tactics combat controller, Sgt. Elchin was trained for immediate deployment into combat operations such as precision strike and personnel recovery, according to the Air Force. He was skilled in reconnaissance operations, air traffic control and terminal attack control operations.

"Dylan had an unusual drive to succeed and contribute to the team. He displayed maturity and stoicism beyond his years, and was always level-headed, no matter the situation," Lt. Col. Gregory Walsh, 26th STS commander, said in a statement. "Our thoughts and prayers go out to Dylan's family, fiancé and friends. He will be sorely missed, but never forgotten."

Sgt. Elchin's awards and decorations included the Bronze Star Medal for heroic or meritorious service in a combat zone, a Purple Heart for suffering a wound, the Army Commendation Medal with Valor and the Air Force Commendation Medal, among many others.

"I think it is very unusual to be so highly decorated" at such a young age, said Mr. Elchin, who served in the Army for eight years. "But you've got to understand, Dylan was very dedicated in everything that he did, so I'm not surprised that he got as far as he did."

Sgt. Elchin enlisted as a special tactics combat controller Aug. 7, 2012, shortly after graduating from Hopewell High School, according to the Air Force. He entered a two-year combat control training program and was assigned to the special tactics squadron upon completion.

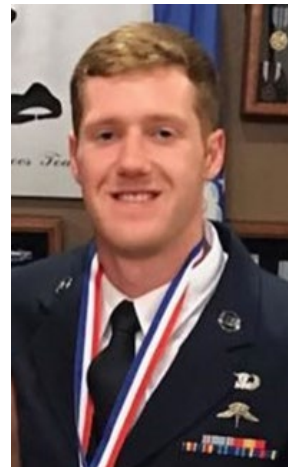
Mr. Elchin said his brother always had an interest in serving, and may have been inspired by his grandfather and other family members who were in the military.

"By the time he was a teenager he was reading up on it, and he was in the Boy Scouts prior to that," Mr. Elchin said. "He's just always had that mentality that that was something he was going to do."

Sgt. Elchin had a variety of interests, according to his brother. He liked to build, and participated in his school's shop program. He was a horn player in the high school band.

Sgt. Elchin attended the Beaver Area School District until he moved to Hopewell High after his junior year in 2011, said Beaver Area superintendent Carrie Rowe.

"As his middle school principal, I remember him being a reserved and friendly student. In middle school he played in the band and enjoyed learning to design and make things in the wood and metal shop," she said in a statement Wednesday night. "Dylan was also kind to students with intellectual disabilities and was part of a





student group who sent holiday cards to residents at McGuire Memorial, a school for students with individualized special education needs.

"Dylan's Beaver Area School District family will remember his as a young man with a kind heart, who was studious, curious about life, and loved his family."

Sgt. Elchin planned on marrying Jordan Stigers after he returned to the United States in late January or early February. They had met while he was training in Las Vegas, where she is from, according to Mr. Elchin. He said the couple wanted to get married in Tahiti then return to the U.S. for another celebration.

The family is still coming to terms with the loss of someone who had so much ahead of him.

"We're all basically waiting to wake up," Elchin said. "We feel like we're in a giant fog, and we just don't want to believe it."

The attack on Sgt. Elchin's vehicle appeared to be the deadliest against American forces since June 2017, when an Afghan army soldier killed three U.S. soldiers in an insider attack. The Taliban also claimed responsibility for that attack.

The Ghazni governor's office said a joint military operation by Afghan and NATO troops had been underway in a village southeast of Ghazni city Tuesday morning when the vehicle struck the explosive.

The U.S. and NATO formally concluded their combat mission in Afghanistan in 2014, but still provide close support to Afghan forces and carry out counter-terrorism operations. Some 15,000 American forces are currently serving in Afghanistan.

