

352nd Special Operations Group Tech Sgt. Announced as the AF Winner of the 2009 Blacks in Government Meritorious Service Award

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RAF Mildenhall, ENGLAND – “Cooley, I need you over here ASAP! The commander’s angry, and he wants to see you right now!”

These are words no one wants to hear from his supervisor. Tech Sgt. LeBaron Cooley promptly reports to his commander and nervously waits to find out what went wrong. After minutes of being grilled on a problem he didn’t know existed, his commander walks around the desk and shakes his hand telling him congratulations on winning an Air Force-level award.

After taking a few minutes to regain his composure, it sinks in to Sergeant Cooley that he was just named the active-duty, AF winner of the 2009 Blacks in Government Meritorious Service Award. This is an award given to individuals who have demonstrated support of the Department of Defense mission and Overseas Contingency Operations and who display role model qualities and core values.

Sergeant Cooley, 352nd Maintenance Squadron, noncommissioned officer in charge, maintenance supply liaison, commonly known as “Commando Supply,” was surprised to say the least.

“A couple of weeks ago, my supervisor and I were researching previous award winners,” said Sergeant Cooley. “They were really impressive. So to find out that I’ve been selected to be among that list of people is awesome.”

Sergeant Cooley while very much aware of his own efforts is quick to give credit where he feels it’s due.

“I have a good supervisor and good leadership behind me pushing me forward,” he said. “When I got to this squadron, I’d be the first to admit I was an underdeveloped staff sergeant. But my supervisor predicted that three things were going to happen. He said I would win awards, get promoted and complete my associate’s degree through the Community College of the Air Force, and through him pushing me, developing me and mentoring me, I’ve done all three. So while I’m the face of this award, I have to give him credit for basically teaching me how to be a good leader.”

Sergeant Cooley’s leadership skills have been put to the test several times during his three years in the 352nd SOG. Most recently, during a deployment to Mali, Sergeant Cooley was involved in the integration of the CV-22 Osprey tilt rotor aircraft in its first-ever overseas deployment. A deployment, that according to the citation written as part of his award package,



was said to strengthen interoperability between Mali and American military forces and enhance the commitment to repel Al-Qaeda efforts within the Trans-Sahara region.

But successfully completing a mission wasn't enough for this sergeant. While there, he also collected more than \$3,000 in donations for Mali schools and helped organize and distribute supplies to more than 2,500 students. Giving back and being involved is important to him.

"I've been very involved with my local community here and in my local churches," he said. "None of this would have been possible without God putting me in these positions," added the sergeant who completed a one-year theological seminary program earning his minister's license since being here.

Faith and family play a key role in keeping him grounded.

"He's deeply rooted in his family," said Sergeant Cooley's supervisor, Master Sgt. Wesley Waithe. "He takes time for his family even though he works long hours. They have a good, solid core," he added.

Sergeant Waithe has known Sergeant Cooley since 2002 when they were stationed together at a previous base and feels an even greater sense of pride to see how far he has come.

"There were some long nights and a lot of learning the hard way, but he overcame and now pound for pound I can put him up against any noncommissioned officer and know he will come out on top," Sergeant Waithe said with pride.

This pride is clearly felt throughout his entire leadership team.

"As a maintenance commander, it makes things easy for you when you have an outstanding noncommissioned officer of Sergeant Cooley's caliber," said Lt. Col. Dean Judge, 352nd MXS commander. "As one of my key 'commando supply' noncommissioned officers, he makes things happen. When it looks like we may not see aircraft parts for months, he manages to get them in days or even hours. His work ethic and leadership abilities are what I look for in all of our noncommissioned officers. The Blacks in Government award is outstanding recognition for LeBaron and is more than well deserved. He is definitely the role model for our younger Airmen to emulate."

Sergeant Cooley will be taking his skills and experience with him as he gets ready to transfer to another base. He is thankful for the time he had here and the opportunities he was given.

"I was put in a position that most of my counterparts would not have been," he said. "There were a lot of things that were entrusted to me as a junior noncommissioned officer."

With the help of his leadership team and his family, he prevailed and is now the winner of this prestigious award.

"My wife is my biggest promoter," Sergeant Cooley said. "Without her support I wouldn't have been able to do any of this."

Sergeant Cooley will be presented his award at a reception in Baltimore, Md., at the end of August.