

NCO Stories

A selection of Valor



Master Sgt. Woodrow Wilson Keeble

Citation to award the Medal of Honor

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty:

Master Sgt. Woodrow W. Keeble distinguished himself by acts of gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty in action with an armed enemy near Sangsan-ni, Korea, on Oct. 20, 1951. On that day, Master Sgt. Keeble was an acting platoon leader for the support platoon in Company G, 19th Infantry, in the attack on Hill 765, a steep and rugged position that was well defended by the enemy. Leading the support platoon, Master Sgt. Keeble saw that the attacking elements had become pinned down on the slope by heavy enemy fire from three well-fortified and strategically placed enemy positions. With complete disregard for his personal safety, Master Sgt. Keeble dashed forward and joined the pinned-down platoon. Then, hugging the ground, Master Sgt. Keeble crawled forward alone until he was in close proximity to one of the hostile machine-gun emplacements. Ignoring

the heavy fire that the crew trained on him, Master Sgt. Keeble activated a grenade and threw it with great accuracy, successfully destroying the position. Continuing his one-man assault, he moved to the second enemy position and destroyed it with another grenade. Despite the fact that the enemy troops were now directing their firepower against him and unleashing a shower of grenades in a frantic attempt to stop his advance, he moved forward against the third hostile emplacement, and skillfully neutralized the remaining enemy position. As his comrades moved forward to join him, Master Sgt. Keeble continued to direct accurate fire against nearby trenches, inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy. Inspired by his courage, Company G successfully moved forward and seized its important objective. The extraordinary courage, selfless service, and devotion to duty displayed that day by Master Sgt. Keeble was an inspiration to all around him and reflected great credit upon himself, his unit and the United States Army.



Medal of Honor awarded to first Sioux Indian

By Staff Sgt. Jim Greenhill
National Guard Bureau

Calling him a “mentor, teacher and legend,” President George W. Bush awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously to Master Sgt. Woodrow “Woody” Wilson Keeble on March 3, 2008.

Keeble is the first full-blooded Sioux Indian to be awarded the Medal of Honor and the 121st member of the National Guard to be awarded the nation’s highest military award for valor, according to National Guard Educational Foundation records.

“It’s taken nearly 60 years for ... Keeble to be awarded the medal he earned on the battlefield in Korea,” Bush said.

Russell Hawkins, Keeble’s stepson, accepted the medal. His stepfather had enlisted in the North Dakota National Guard in 1942.

The president described the former North Dakota National Guard member as “strong, courageous, a great Soldier, a good Samaritan.” The White House ceremony was attended by Vice President Richard Cheney; Secretary of Defense Robert Gates; the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Lt. Gen. H. Steven Blum, chief of the National Guard Bureau; and numerous other civilian and military leaders. The president recognized the 17 members of Keeble’s surviving family present and dozens of Sioux Indians, many of them uniformed veterans.

“His nominating paperwork was lost, and then it was resubmitted, and then it was lost again,” Bush explained. “Then the deadline passed, and Woody and his family were told it was too late. Some blamed the bureaucracy for a shameful blunder. Others suspected racism. ... Whatever the reason, the first Sioux to ever receive the Medal of Honor died without knowing it was his. A terrible injustice was done to a good man, to his family and to history. ... On behalf of a grateful nation, I deeply regret that this tribute comes decades too late.”

His voice lowered, the commander-in-chief became storyteller-in-chief as he honored Keeble by telling of his exploits as a Soldier on the battlefield and of the respect he earned as a citizen in his community.

“There are some things we can still do for him,” Bush said. “We can tell his story. We can honor his memory. And, we can follow his lead – by showing all those who have followed him on the battlefield the same love and generosity of spirit that Woody showed his country every day.”

Keeble’s Medal of Honor was awarded for action near Sangsan-ni, Korea, Oct. 20, 1951. The medal was awarded for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity, at the risk of his life, above and beyond the call of duty.

Prior to Oct. 20, Keeble’s company had taken heavy losses, and the master sergeant himself had more than 83 grenade fragments in his body, Bush said. Defying his doctor, he returned to the battlefield.

“Communist forces still held a crucial hill,” Bush said. “They had pinned down U.S. forces. ... One Soldier said the enemy lobbed so many grenades ... that they looked like a flock of blackbirds. ... Nothing seemed to be working. ... American boys were dying. But our forces had one advantage: Woody was back, and Woody was some kind of mad.

“He grabbed grenades and his weapon and climbed that crucial hill alone. Woody climbed hundreds of yards through dirt and rock, with his wounds aching, bullets flying and grenades falling. Someone remarked, ‘Either he’s the bravest Soldier I have ever met, or he’s crazy.’ Soldiers watched in awe as Woody single-handedly took out one machine gun nest and then another. When Woody was through, all 16 enemy Soldiers were dead, the hill was taken and the Allies won the day.”

The president credited Keeble’s heroism with saving many American lives.

But Keeble’s life wasn’t defined by that act alone. The president described the man who won the affection and respect of those with whom he served, of his fellow Sioux and of those who came into contact with him.

He was already a decorated veteran of World War II for actions at Guadalcanal. The Chicago White Sox scouted him, but he would throw grenades, not baseballs. He led Soldiers through a minefield and fought on despite two shots to the arm.

On the platform behind the president were two empty chairs, honoring a Sioux tradition by representing Woody and his wife Blossom and acknowledging their passing into the spiritual world.

The president called the master sergeant “an everyday hero,” who despite his war injuries and strokes, was a devoted veteran who never complained about his missing medal.

“The Sioux have a saying: ‘The life of a man is a circle,’” Bush said. “Today we complete Woody Keeble’s circle – from an example to his men to an example for the ages.”

Hawkins talked about his stepfather after the ceremony. “His honor will continue by the honor that his country gave him by recognizing him with the Medal of Honor,” he said.

“It means a lot to the Sioux nation,” Hawkins said. “The traditional values that we had were ones of bravery, humility and generosity, and when you look at Woodrow’s life as a Soldier and as a civilian, you can see that he exemplified all those qualities.”

Secretary of the Army Pete Geren called Keeble an extraordinary American hero. He quoted Keeble’s own writings about his combat experiences: “There were terrible moments that encompassed a lifetime, an endlessness when terror was so strong in me that I could feel idiocy replace reason. Yet, I never left my position, nor have I shirked hazardous duty. Fear never made a coward out of me.”

The Defense Department posthumously inducted Keeble into its Hall of Heroes the day after Bush bestowed on him the Medal of Honor.