

NCO Stories

A selection of Valor



MEDAL OF HONOR

Wounded Soldier second living recipient for actions in Afghanistan

By Lisa Daniel
American Forces Press Service

President Barack Obama awarded the country's highest military honor July 12 to Sgt. 1st Class Leroy A. Petry, a ranger who was shot in both legs and had his hand blown off while saving his fellow Soldiers during a firefight in Afghanistan.

Petry became only the second living veteran of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to receive the award, which Obama presented during a White House ceremony attended by Petry, his wife, his four children and more than a hundred of his family members, mostly from his native New Mexico.

Army Secretary John M. McHugh and Army Chief of Staff Gen. Martin E. Dempsey also attended the ceremony, as did members of Company D, 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, with which Petry served in Afghanistan.

Calling Petry, 31, "a true hero," Obama recounted how the Soldier was on his seventh combat deployment in Afghanistan on May 26, 2008, when he took part in a high-risk daytime operation to



capture an insurgent leader in a compound near the Pakistan border.

As helicopters delivered Petry and the other rangers into the area, they were met with heavy automatic weapons fire. Petry and then-Pfc. Lucas Robinson were wounded as they moved to secure a courtyard. The two were joined by then-Sgt. Daniel Higgins, a team leader, who was assessing their wounds when an enemy grenade injured Robinson and Higgins. A

second grenade then landed just feet from the Soldiers.

"Every human impulse would tell a person to turn away," Obama said. "That's what Sgt. Petry could have done." Instead, Petry did something extraordinary: He picked up the grenade to throw it back.

"What compels a person to risk everything so that others might live?" the president asked. Obama said Petry answered the question while meeting with him before the ceremony, saying that his fellow Soldiers are his brothers, and he protected them just as he would his family.

"With that selfless act, Leroy saved two of his ranger brothers, and they are with us today," he said.

Petry picked up the grenade to throw it back at the enemy, and it detonated, amputating his right hand. Still, Obama said, Petry "remained calm, put on his own tourniquet, and continued to lead."

"Leroy Petry shows us that true heroes still exist," the president said. "His service speaks to the very essence of America: No matter how hard the journey, no matter how steep the climb, we don't give up."

"I didn't know it had gone off"

By C. Todd Lopez
Army News Service

"There was a little bit of a meat skirt, for lack of better words, hanging around the edges. It was oozing. I could see the radius and ulna bone sticking up maybe about half an inch."

Sgt. 1st Class Leroy A. Petry, who received the Medal of Honor from the president of the United States on July 12, recounted the moment after his hand was taken from him by a grenade during a May 26, 2008, operation in Afghanistan.

"It was vivid — where I could see the black marks from where the burns were, and a little bit of the dirt, and the smell of explosives. I sat up and I grabbed it. And, it's a little strange," Petry said. "But, this is what was in my mind: 'Why isn't this thing spraying off into the wind like in Hollywood?'"

After that, the seasoned ranger — who at the time was on his seventh deployment in support of combat operations both in Iraq and Afghanistan — had to take charge of his own situation, and of the young Soldiers whom he led.

Combat actions

In Afghanistan, Petry was assigned to Company D, 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment out of Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash. Petry's actions came as part of a rare daylight raid to capture a high-value target.

"It's a little out of the norm," Petry said of conducting a mission with the sun overhead. "But, just like any other mission, we said we're going to go out there and do what we do: execute the mission."

During the mission, Petry was to locate himself with the platoon headquarters in the target building once it was secured. There, he was to serve as the senior NCO at the site for the remainder of the operation.

But, things quickly got dangerous for Petry and his team. Insurgents opened fire on Petry and his men.

Petry had a fellow ranger, Pfc. Lucas Robinson, at his side. The two were to



U.S. Army photo

Sgt. 1st Class Leroy A. Petry stands in front of the headquarters of the 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash.

clear the outer courtyard of the target building. It was there the two first saw the enemy.

"I remember seeing the guy out of my peripheral vision," Petry said. "Two guys with AKs at their hip, just spraying, and one happened to strike me right in the thighs."

Robinson was also hit, Petry said. "He was struck right in his rib cage on his left side, and he continued along and followed behind me."

While wounded and under enemy fire, Petry led Robinson to the cover of a chicken coop in the courtyard. The enemy continued to deliver fire at the two Soldiers.

Petry reported that contact had been made with the enemy, and as a result, team member Sgt. Daniel Higgins moved to the outer courtyard. As Higgins moved toward the chicken coop to meet with the two wounded Soldiers, Petry threw a thermobaric grenade toward the enemy. That explosion caused a lull in enemy fire.

As Higgins evaluated the wounds of both Petry and Robinson, an insurgent threw a grenade over the chicken coop. The grenade landed about 10 meters from the three rangers, knocked them to the ground, and wounded Higgins and Robinson.

With the three Soldiers taking cover in the coop, an insurgent threw yet another grenade. This time, the grenade landed just a few feet from the three Soldiers — much closer than the earlier grenade.

"It was almost instinct — off training," Petry said of his response to the situation. "It was probably going to kill all three of us. I had time to visually see the hand grenade. And I figure it's got about a four-and-half second fuse, depending on how long it has been in the elements and the weather and everything and how long the pin has been pulled. I figure if you have time to see it, you have time to kick it, throw it, just get it out there."

That's when Petry picked up the grenade and threw it away from him and his



U.S. Army photo

The 2nd Ranger Battalion during the 2008 deployment to Afghanistan. Petry is in the second row, third from left.

buddies. As it turns out, he did have the time to save all three of their lives — but not time to save his hand.

The grenade exploded as he threw it, destroying his throwing hand.

“I didn’t really feel much pain,” he said. “I didn’t know it had gone off and taken my hand until I sat back up and saw it was completely amputated at the wrist.”

Petry put a tourniquet on his arm to prevent further blood loss. That was something he said he knew how to do as a result of good Army training. Then he had to focus on those around him.

“The younger guys next to me were kind of still in shock and awe,” Petry said, and he tasked himself to do what NCOs are trained to do: “Maintaining control, maintaining awareness, trying to remain calm — so they stay calm.”

He radioed for help, but the fighting wasn’t over. Staff Sgt. James Roberts engaged the enemy and was able to suppress their fire. But another insurgent began firing and fatally wounded Spc. Christopher Gathercole. Higgins and Robinson returned fire and killed the enemy.

Moments later, Sgt. 1st Class Jerod Staidle, the platoon sergeant, and Spc.

Gary Depriest, the platoon medic, arrived in the outer courtyard. After directing Depriest to treat Gathercole, Staidle moved to Petry’s position. Staidle and Higgins then assisted Petry as he moved to the casualty collection point.

Within a week, he’d be back in the United States.

A hand in recovery

While passing through hospitals back to the United States, doctors had operated to remove damaged or dead tissue from Petry’s arm, in part, to prevent infection. But when he arrived stateside, his wound was still open, the bone was still exposed and it was wrapped with gauze.

“He had enough skin, but no functioning hand ... by the time he got to us,” said Col. James Ficke, Petry’s orthopedic surgeon. “When he looked at his hand at the time of his wound, when he put the tourniquet on, he had tissue — skin and broken bones. But no fingers or anything.”

Ficke serves as the chairman of the Department of Orthopedics and Rehabilitation at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio. He also became Petry’s friend.

“We met when he was evacuated back to Brooke AMC,” Ficke said. “I was on call when he came in to the hospital.”

Though it was by chance that Petry landed in Ficke’s hospital while he was on duty, the doctor admits he kind of knew Petry was coming. Ficke and Petry’s commander had served together in Iraq.

“He emailed me and said to look out for him,” Ficke said. “I knew that Sgt. Petry was going to be one of the guys who I was going to have a relationship with for a long time.”

Petry was 28 at the time he was wounded, and Ficke said it was devastating for a young man — in the prime of his life — to suffer such a catastrophic wound. From the beginning, though, Ficke said Petry was gunning to get back to the fight.

“He wanted to stay in the Army very much,” he said. “He wanted to deploy again; he wanted to restore his life as much as he could. We talked a lot about what was possible and what we could help him with.”

Petry said he drew inspiration from those around him in the hospital — from fellow Soldiers with severe burns and

“phenomenal attitudes,” to those with injuries similar to his own.

“The first person that came and visited me in the hospital was a double-amputee above the elbow,” Petry said. “She had the greatest attitude. She was hanging out with the guys, having a great time. To see that kind of reaction, I thought I have nothing to complain about.”

Ficke said that he was able to close Petry’s wound over his wrist, so the ranger had available a functioning wrist that could provide rotation. Ideally, a prosthetic hand would fit over that, and he would use his wrist to rotate the hand. But his wrist was not as capable as it could have been, Ficke said.

“Sometimes his own ability to turn that wrist would not be as good as some of the prostheses,” Ficke said. “He and I and the prosthetist all kind of talked and decided to ... take away that wrist so that he could have a prosthesis that would do that with motors.”

Removing a living part of his body to replace it with a more capable mechanical equivalent might be a tough choice, but Petry said he’s pleased with the results.

“It’s a great hand,” Petry said. “It’s got a couple of sensors built in underneath the casting right above the skin. What’ll happen is every muscle contraction you make will send signals up to the hand. Each finger, when it meets resistance, it will stop. So you’ve got more dexterity to grab round shapes and stuff like that.”

Petry’s prosthetist built a fitting to slide over Petry’s forearm so the hand can attach and also placed sensors to pick up electrical signals from his muscles. After working with a therapist, Petry’s robotic hand moves with the very signals he used to use to control his own hand.

“I used it everywhere,” he said. “Actually, I got myself into trouble with recovery. I wore the arm too long and didn’t let my limb get used to it. So, I swelled up, and I couldn’t wear it for a couple days.”

Now, Petry is pretty adept with his new robotic hand. He uses it back home with his family and as he moves throughout the Army meeting new people who are interested in his story.

“I’m meeting people all the time. It feels great to actually shake their hands with my right hand,” he said. “I’m fortunate they have this type of medical

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:

Staff Sgt. Leroy A. Petry distinguished himself by acts of gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty in action with an armed enemy in the vicinity of Paktia province, Afghanistan, on May 26, 2008. As a weapons squad leader with D Company, 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, Staff Sgt. Petry moved to clear the courtyard of a house that potentially contained high-value combatants. While crossing the courtyard, Staff Sgt. Petry and another ranger were engaged and wounded by automatic weapons fire from enemy fighters. Still under enemy fire, and wounded in both legs, Staff Sgt. Petry led the other ranger to cover. He then reported the situation and engaged the enemy with a hand grenade, providing suppression as another ranger moved to his position. The enemy quickly responded by maneuvering closer and throwing grenades. The first grenade explosion knocked his two fellow rangers to the ground and wounded both with shrapnel. A second grenade then landed only a few feet away from them. Instantly realizing the danger, Staff Sgt. Petry, unhesitatingly and with complete disregard for his safety, deliberately and selflessly moved forward, picked up the grenade, and in an effort to clear the immediate threat, threw the grenade away from his fellow Rangers. As he was releasing the grenade it detonated, amputating his right hand at the wrist and further injuring him with multiple shrapnel wounds. Although picking up and throwing the live grenade grievously wounded Staff Sgt. Petry, his gallant act undeniably saved his fellow rangers from being severely wounded or killed. Despite the severity of his wounds, Staff Sgt. Petry continued to maintain the presence of mind to place a tourniquet on his right wrist before communicating the situation by radio in order to coordinate support for himself and his fellow wounded Rangers. Staff Sgt. Petry’s extraordinary heroism and devotion to duty are in keeping with the highest traditions of military service, and reflect great credit upon himself, 75th Ranger Regiment, and the United States Army.



U.S. Army photo

Petry (far right), his wife, Ashley (far left), and family in Steilacoom, Wash., in 2010.



U.S. Army photo

Petry re-enlists during a May 2010 ceremony at Fort Lewis, Wash.

technology. I thought I was going to end up with a set of hooks — and I got those as well. But, when they handed me a prosthetic hand that functions pretty darn close to a real thing, I was ecstatic.”

Petry was injured in May 2008, and didn’t actually make it home permanently until April 2009 — a span of more than 10 months.

It was two things, Petry said, that he thought about as he healed and that drove him to push through the therapy so he could get back to the people he wanted to be around.

“My family, and my second family — the 2nd Ranger Battalion,” he said. “I used to joke with my wife. I used to tell her, ‘Hey, I got my Alpha and Bravo team leaders at work, and you’re my Charlie team leader.’ We’re all one big happy family. I really wanted to get back and see the guys. I really miss the unit, the camaraderie, the high spirit and to keep doing what I can for the Army.”

Coming home to normal

Petry’s got more than himself and his fellow rangers to concern himself with. Like a lot of Soldiers, he’s got a wife and kids who worried about him while he battled for freedom in Afghanistan. Petry and his wife, Ashley, have four children: Brittany, Austin, Reagan and Landon.

Ashley first heard about her husband’s wounds when Soldiers came to their front door — a day her mother was visiting to help with the kids.

“It was Memorial Day morning, and the kids were out of school,” she said. “We’d slept in late ... I was still in pajamas. The doorbell rang, and we’ve always been briefed as spouses if they come to your door what they would be dressed in and how many would be there if there was a casualty.”

She said she knew by the way the Soldiers were dressed — and how many of them there were — that Petry had not been killed. But, she knew something was wrong.

Less than a week later, Ashley and the kids would meet up with Petry — the first time they’d seen him since he’d deployed.

“I think the acceptance came when we were actually able to bring the kids to Texas, and they could see him,” Ashley said.

At first concerned about their youngest son, Ashley said she didn’t know what to expect when the boy would see his dad for the first time without a hand.

“But, he ran straight to him. And, from day one, he’s had a nickname for it,” Ashley said of her husband’s shortened forearm — his stump. “He calls it Nubby,” she said.

“Even when I’m gone on the road, I’ll call late at night and tell him goodnight,” Petry said. “He’ll say, ‘Tell Nubby goodnight for me.’”

Both Petry and his wife say he’s made some changes at home, but has otherwise adjusted to life with his new mechanical hand.

Ashley, initially worried Petry would need assistance with everyday tasks, said he has turned down offers of help. Instead, he’s become skilled doing all the things other Soldiers do for themselves — but with one mechanical hand.

“From the day I went to the hospital, he was doing everything himself,” she said. That included such things as shaving and cutting his fingernails. “He didn’t want help. At home, we don’t see him as injured. He sometimes forgets he has the prosthetic.”

Petry even shakes hands with new people using his prosthetic — something others might be uncomfortable with, but something he said he is proud of. On a March trip to Washington, D.C., he got to use his new hand to greet Army leaders.

Despite some adjustments that Petry said do in fact require him to ask his family for help, and that he said means he gets more interaction with his kids, he has actually learned to do some things with his prosthetic that he didn’t do before.

“I picked up golf with my golf attachment,” he said.

A proud ranger

Petry’s been a ranger since basic training. And, he wasn’t the first in his family to do so.

“My cousin was actually serving in the 2nd Ranger Battalion when I was finishing up high school, debating on when or what I was going to do,” he said. “He explained a lot to me what the regiment did, and that was a sell for me.”

Petry said after being sold on the Rangers by his cousin, he had made up his mind to follow in his footsteps. After completion of One Station Unit Training, the Basic Airborne Course and the Ranger Assessment and Selection Program — all at Fort Benning, Ga. — Petry got assigned to 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment.

Today, Petry holds his unit, and his ranger team members in high esteem.

“They’re my Ranger brothers,” he

said. "They're great guys, all of them. And they are definitely guys you'd want to be at the front lines with. I'm glad they were there that day with me."

Petry said he has honored his fellow fallen rangers — the ones he calls real heroes — by keeping their names as close to him as possible.

"I've got all the names of the 2/75 Rangers we've lost on my prosthetic arm," he said. "As much as I like to say 'remember the fallen heroes,' those are the

true heroes who sacrificed it all. I didn't sacrifice anything more than anyone else who is out there."

Soldiering on

Despite his injuries, Petry recently re-upped in the Army for eight more years, which will take him to a full 20 years of service.

Petry is the ninth service member to have been named a recipient of the Medal of Honor for actions in Afghanistan or

Iraq. Of prior recipients, all but Staff Sgt. Salvatore Giunta were awarded the honor posthumously.

Petry currently serves as a liaison officer for the U.S. Special Operations Command Care Coalition-Northwest Region, and provides oversight to wounded, ill and injured service members, and their families.

He enlisted in the Army from his hometown of Santa Fe, N.M., in September 1999.

Petry's fellow NCOs recount heroic acts

By Marisa Petrich
Northwest Guardian

In every life there are watershed moments. Sgt. 1st Class Leroy A. Petry's was more difficult than most.

Petry had already been shot in both legs while on a mission in Paktia province, Afghanistan, in May 2008, when a grenade was thrown over a wall into the compound he was clearing.

When it landed just feet away from two of his squadmates from the 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, he knew exactly what to do. Without hesitating, Petry picked up the grenade to toss it back. As he released it, it detonated, taking off his right hand.

The action saved two lives, of Sgt. Daniel Higgins and Pfc. Lucas Robinson, and earned him the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military honor.

"I think you see heroic actions a lot in a combat zone, whether you want to or not," said Master Sgt. Steven Walter on June 13 at the battalion's headquarters at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash. "I think this one stood out."

Walter and two other ranger NCOs, Sgt. 1st Class Jerod Staidle and Master Sgt. Reese Teakell, described Petry as hardworking, selfless and happy-go-lucky. All three were part of the mission that day.

"I just remember thinking to myself, I wasn't surprised that he had done what he had done," Staidle said.

When the grenade landed nearby, Petry could have saved himself, the NCOs pointed out. He was sitting in a position



Photo by J.D. Leipold

Medal of Honor recipient Sgt. 1st Class Leroy A. Petry receives a standing ovation July 12 from President Barack Obama and guests in the East Room of the White House.

that would have made it easy. Instead, he acted to save his fellow rangers.

Afterward, even with his wounds, he continued reminding his squad members not to stand around. There was a job to do.

To the people who know him, none of this seems out of the ordinary.

"He will do the right thing and the hard thing regardless of if there's an easier way out there," Teakell said.

Now the married father of four works with wounded, injured and ill service

members. He's taken up skeet shooting and pheasant hunting since losing his hand, and enjoys showing off his prosthetic's many attachments. He jokes around as much as ever.

But Petry is also one of few people who knows exactly how he would react when confronted with an extreme situation. His years of training, experience and, most importantly, his character came into play at that critical moment.

"It's the test," Teakell said.