

# NCO Stories

*A selection of Valor*



## MEDAL OF HONOR

*Sergeant is first living Marine to receive highest award for actions in Afghanistan*

**By Karen Parrish  
American Forces Press Service**

At a White House ceremony Sept. 15, President Barack Obama draped the pale blue ribbon suspending the Medal of Honor around the neck of Marine Corps Sgt. Dakota L. Meyer, the first living Marine to receive the award for actions in Iraq or Afghanistan.

“It’s been said that where there is a brave man, in the thickest of the fight, there is the post of honor,” Obama said. “Today we pay tribute to an American who placed himself in the thick of the fight again, and again, and again.”

Obama said Meyer, who is now 23 and was just 21 that day in Afghanistan, is “one of the most down-to-earth guys you will ever meet.”

When the president’s staff called the young Marine so the commander in chief could officially notify him of the medal, Obama said Meyer was at work on his new civilian job at a construction site.

“He felt he couldn’t take the call right then because, he said, ‘If I don’t work, I



don’t get paid,” Obama said.

“So we arranged to make sure he got the call during his lunch break,” the president added.

Obama then turned to the events of Sept. 8, 2009, the day Meyer earned the medal as a corporal serving with Marine Embedded Training Team 2-8, Regional Corps Advisory Command 3-7, in Kunar province, Afghanistan.

Just before dawn, a patrol of Afghan forces and their American trainers, on foot and making their way through a narrow valley, was planning to meet with a group of village elders, the president said.

“Suddenly, all over the valley, the lights go out — and that’s when it happens,” Obama said.

About a mile away, Meyer and Marine Corps Staff Sgt. Juan Rodriguez-Chavez could hear the ambush over the radio.

Gunfire poured from houses, the hill-sides, and even the local school, Obama said.

Soon, the patrol was pinned down, taking ferocious fire from three sides. “Men were being wounded and killed, and four Americans — Dakota’s friends — were surrounded,” he said.

After asking four times to go closer to the fight to help, and hearing each time that it was too dangerous, the two Marines got inside a nearby humvee and headed into the fight, Rodriguez-Chavez at the wheel and Meyer manning the gun turret.

“They were defying orders, but they

were doing what they thought was right,” the president said.

On two solo trips into the ambush area, Meyer repeatedly got out of the humvee to help Afghan troops, many of them wounded, get inside the vehicle and back to safety.

“A third time they went back, insurgents running right up to the front of the humvee, Dakota fighting them off,” Obama said.

This time, the men drove right up to the line of fire, and helped a group of wounded Americans battle their way to safety.

They then headed back on the fourth trip with Meyer wounded in the arm and the vehicle riddled with bullets and shrapnel, the president said.

“Dakota later confessed, ‘I didn’t think I was going to die, I knew I was.’ But still, they pushed on, finding the wounded [and] delivering them to safety,” Obama said.

On the fifth trip, the two Marines drove through fire “that seemed to come from every window, every doorway, every alley,” he said.

Finally, the two reached the four Americans who had been surrounded.

“Dakota jumped out and he ran toward them, drawing all those enemy guns toward himself, bullets kicking up the dirt all around him,” Obama said.

Meyer and others who had joined him picked up the fallen Marines and, “through all those bullets, all the smoke, all the chaos, carried them out one by one — because as Dakota says, that’s what you do for a brother,” Obama said.

“Dakota says he’ll accept this medal in their name,” the president said. “So today, we remember the husband who loved the outdoors, Lt. Michael Johnson; the husband and father they called ‘Gunny J,’ Gunnery Sgt. Edwin Johnson; the determined Marine who fought to get on that team, Staff Sgt. Aaron Kenefick; the medic who gave his life tending to his teammates, Hospitalman 3rd Class James Layton; and a Soldier wounded in that battle who was never recovered: Sgt. 1st Class Kenneth Westbrook.”

Obama said while he knows Meyer

has thought of himself as a failure because some of his teammates didn’t come home, “as your commander in chief, and on behalf of everyone here today and all Americans, I want you to know it’s quite the opposite.”

“Because of your honor, 36 men are alive today,” the president said. “Because of your courage, four fallen American heroes came home, and in the words of James Layton’s mom, [their families] could lay their sons to rest with dignity.”



**Top:** President Barack Obama presents the Medal of Honor to Marine Corps Sgt. Dakota Meyer on Sept. 15 during a ceremony in the East Room of the White House.

U.S. Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Jimmy D. Shea

**Bottom:** Sgt. Dakota Meyer in a humvee when he was assigned to Embedded Training Team 2-8 advising the Afghan National Army in the eastern provinces of Afghanistan.

Courtesy photo

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Meyer's father, Mike, grandparents, and more than a hundred friends and family members attended the ceremony.

Because of Meyer's humble example, children all across America will know that "no matter who you are or where you come from, you can do great things as a citizen and a member of the American family," the president said.

Obama then asked Rodriguez-Chavez, now a gunnery sergeant, and all those present at the ceremony who served with Meyer, to stand "and accept the thanks of a grateful nation."

Meyer joined in the applause.

Just before the reading of the citation and the medal presentation, Obama said, "Every member of our team is as important as the other. That's a lesson that we all have to remember, as citizens and as a nation, as we meet the tests of our time here at home and around the world. To our Marines, to all our men and women in uniform, to our fellow Americans, let us always be faithful."

Meyer, who has left the active Marine Corps and is a sergeant in the inactive reserve, is the 298th Marine ever to have received the medal. The nation's high-



U.S. Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Jimmy D. Shea

Medal of Honor recipients Sgt. 1st Class Leroy Arthur Petry, left, and Marine Corps Sgt. Dakota Meyer, right, stand side-by-side after Meyer received his medal from President Obama.

est military honor, the Medal of Honor is awarded for risk of life in combat beyond the call of duty.

Meyer is the third living service member to receive the Medal of Honor for

actions during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, following Army Staff Sgt. Salvatore A. Giunta, who received the medal Nov. 16, 2010, and Army Sgt. 1st Class Leroy Petry, who accepted the award July 12.

## 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 while serving with Marine Embedded Training Team 2-8, Regional Corps Advisory Command 3-7, in Kunar Province, Afghanistan, on 8 September 2009. Corporal Meyer maintained security at a patrol rally point while other members of his team moved on foot with two platoons of Afghan National Army and Border Police into the village of Ganjgal for a pre-dawn meeting with village elders. Moving into the village, the patrol was ambushed by more than 50 enemy fighters firing rocket propelled grenades, mortars, and machine guns from houses and fortified positions on the slopes above. Hearing over the radio that four U.S. team members were cut off, Corporal Meyer seized the initiative. With a fellow Marine driving, Corporal Meyer took the exposed gunner's position in a gun-truck as they drove down the steeply terraced terrain in a daring attempt to disrupt the enemy attack and locate the trapped U.S. team. Disregarding intense enemy fire now concentrated on their lone vehicle, Corporal Meyer killed a number of enemy fighters with the mounted machine guns and his rifle, some at near point blank range, as he and his driver made three solo trips*

*into the ambush area. During the first two trips, he and his driver evacuated two dozen Afghan soldiers, many of whom were wounded. When one machine gun became inoperable, he directed a return to the rally point to switch to another gun-truck for a third trip into the ambush area where his accurate fire directly supported the remaining U.S. personnel and Afghan soldiers fighting their way out of the ambush. Despite a shrapnel wound to his arm, Corporal Meyer made two more trips into the ambush area in a third gun-truck accompanied by four other Afghan vehicles to recover more wounded Afghan soldiers and search for the missing U.S. team members. Still under heavy enemy fire, he dismounted the vehicle on the fifth trip and moved on foot to locate and recover the bodies of his team members. Corporal Meyer's daring initiative and bold fighting spirit throughout the 6-hour battle significantly disrupted the enemy's attack and inspired the members of the combined force to fight on. His unwavering courage and steadfast devotion to his U.S. and Afghan comrades in the face of almost certain death reflected great credit upon himself and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.*