

# Medal of Honor

## Sgt. Maj. Thomas P. Payne

**S**gt. Maj. Thomas P. Payne was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions during a hostage rescue mission on 22 October 2015 in Kirkuk Province, Iraq. Then Sgt. 1st Class Payne was an assistant team leader on a special operations joint task force with a mission to rescue over seventy Iraqi hostages being held by the Islamic State (IS) in a prison compound in the northern town of Hawija.

President Donald Trump presented the Nation's highest award for valor in an 11 September 2020 White House ceremony. In his remarks, the president said of Payne, "We stand in awe of your heroic, daring and gallant deeds. You truly went above and beyond the call of duty to earn our Nation's highest military honor."

Inserting in CH-47 helicopters, Payne and his team of American and Kurdish Special Forces landed and immediately became engaged in a firefight with IS forces. They fought their way to one of two buildings in the prison compound known to house the hostages, where Payne used bolt cutters to cut the locks on a prison door and free nearly forty hostages.

Hearing an urgent call from other task force members engaged in a fierce battle at the second building, Payne urged his team to maneuver about thirty meters to the heavily fortified building, which was partially on fire. As his team fought through the enemy fire and repelled IS fighters who were detonating suicide vests, he risked his own life by entering the burning building multiple times to breach the locked doors and free the remaining prisoners.

"Pat and his fellow Rangers fought through the fire, the bullets and the deadly blasts," Trump said in his speech. "He ran right back into that raging blaze ... and



Sgt. Maj. Thomas P. Payne in 2020. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

released the rest of the hostages as the building began to collapse."

Payne's team was able to liberate and extract seventy-five prisoners by helicopter, although the aircraft were packed so tight that his team had to stand for the return flight. The team killed twenty enemy fighters during the mission, but sustained one fatality, Master Sgt. Josh Wheeler.

For more on Payne's award, see the U.S. Army's Medal of Honor website at <https://www.army.mil/medalofhonor/payne/>. ■