



Maj. Gen. H. R. McMaster (left), commanding general of the U.S. Army Maneuver Center of Excellence and Fort Benning, Ga., presents Charlene Westbrook, the wife of Sgt. 1st. Class Kenneth Westbrook, and her three sons — Zachary, Joshua and Joseph — with her husband's Silver Star during a ceremony April 19, 2013. (Photo by Ashley Cross)

Fallen NCO's family accepts posthumous Silver Star

By Nick Duke

Fort Benning Bayonet

The family of Sgt. 1st Class Kenneth Westbrook was presented with his Silver Star for gallantry, and his second Combat Infantryman Badge on April 19 during an emotional ceremony at Derby Auditorium at Fort Benning, Ga.

Westbrook died Oct. 7, 2009, as a result of wounds suffered Sept. 8, 2009, when insurgents attacked his unit in the Ganjgal Valley of Afghanistan.

Receiving the award nearly three and a half years after his death, Westbrook's wife, Charlene, said she felt an immense sense of pride in her husband.

"I would say that I'm so very proud of him, and that he's my hero," she said. "Actually, he'd probably grimace and say, 'No, I'm not a hero. I'm just doing my job.'"

The Silver Star is the Army's third highest award for gallantry, behind only the Distinguished Service Cross and the Medal of Honor.

When family members received word that the Silver Star would be posthumously awarded, they selected Fort Benning as the site of the ceremony, intending to reflect Westbrook's love of and dedication to the Army as a whole, but also to the infantry.

"I met my husband when I was 13, and he asked me what I wanted to do for a career after we graduated high school. I said, 'I don't know. I'm 13 years old. I'm not thinking about my future,'" Charlene Westbrook recalled. "But he, from the very beginning, said, 'I'm going to be an infantryman.' He came to basic training here, and this place meant so much to him. He was so proud to have been an infantryman for 22 years."



Sgt. 1st Class Kenneth Westbrook

The family also took the opportunity to attend a basic training graduation before the Silver Star ceremony.

"It is fitting that we honor the courage and sacrifice of one of our fallen warriors shortly after we gathered to celebrate the entry of new Soldiers into our Army," said Maj. Gen. H. R. McMaster, commanding general of

the U.S. Army Maneuver Center of Excellence and Fort Benning, during his remarks at the Silver Star ceremony. "[It's] fitting because what those young men and Sgt. 1st Class Westbrook have in common is that they volunteered to answer our nation's call to duty in a time of war."

"It is fitting that we are part of a living, historical community in which we do our best to preserve the legacy of courage and selfless service of those, like Kenneth West-

brook who have gone before us," McMaster said. "Fitting because we want those who knew and loved Sgt. 1st Class Westbrook to know that he will not be forgotten, that we will continue to honor his sacrifice and remember the example that he set for all of us."

The battle that led to Westbrook's death occurred Sept. 8, 2009, when a joint force of American and Afghan personnel that Westbrook was working with were caught in an ambush.

According to the Silver Star award citation, while taking fire from rocket-propelled grenades, mortars and machine guns, Westbrook intentionally placed himself in the line of direct enemy fire without cover and concealment in an effort to engage targets and direct his Afghan peers.

He was wounded during the battle, but did not succumb to his injuries for 30 days.

Jonathan Landay, a reporter for McClatchy newspapers who was embedded with the joint force, said the scene was one of the worst he had ever seen.

"Within a few minutes, it was just an unbelievable kill zone," Landay said. "All the guys who were in there had been veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, and they had never been caught in such hellacious fire. It was coming from three sides."

Westbrook was preceded in death by his brother, Sgt. Marshall Westbrook of the 126th Military Police Company, New Mexico Army National Guard, who died Oct. 1, 2005, while serving near Baghdad, Iraq.

Charlene Westbrook said the award helped the family to feel like they were still a part of the Army family. ■



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