



# Medal of Honor Processing To Receive Greater Oversight

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**W**ASHINGTON — As former Army Capt. William D. Swenson was inducted into the Pentagon Hall of Heroes, Oct. 16, Secretary of the Army John McHugh announced a directive to improve the Medal of Honor nomination and review process.

Swenson's nomination packet had been lost following the Battle of Ganjgal in Afghanistan four years ago and McHugh said the new process would provide greater oversight to "ensure that no future award packet is lost along the way or paperwork misplaced or somehow forgotten in the fog of war."

Opening the ceremony in the Pentagon auditorium the day following Swenson's Medal of Honor presentation at the White House, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Ray Odierno told the standing-room-only audience of Gold Star families, Swenson's battle buddies, senior leadership and Pentagon workers that "Swenson's strength of character was undeniable."

"Even after the battle, Will was not afraid to point out deficiencies in the operation that caused difficulties in obtaining the appropriate and timely support necessary," Odierno said. "He recognized the importance of assessing performance, and had the charac-

ter to stick to his convictions ... that's how we grow Soldiers ... that's how we grow as an Army, and that's how we grow as a joint force."

While serving as one of two Army advisors and mentors to the Afghan National Border Police, Swenson and a contingent of 12 Marine Corps advisers to the Afghan National Army and one Navy corpsman were making their way to the village of Ganjgal, about 10 miles from the Pakistan border. They were to meet with the village elders over tea and discuss improvements to a mosque and how Afghan National Security Forces could help them.

Suddenly, the coalition force was ambushed, flanked on three sides. An immediate withdrawal was called for. Swenson radioed for white phosphorous smoke to shield the retreat as well as artillery placement, but both were denied several times on the basis that the civilian population was too close. The battle raged for more than six hours and when all was said and done — three Marines and a Sailor were killed and Swenson's partner and friend, Sgt. 1st Class Kenneth Westbrook, was mortally wounded. Eight Afghan soldiers died too, Sept. 8, 2009, more than four years ago.



Former Army Capt. William D. Swenson (center) sits with his significant other Kelsey Long, and his parents Julia Buchholz and Carl Swenson, at his induction ceremony into the Pentagon Hall of Heroes, Oct. 16, 2013. Behind Swenson are several of the Marines who served with him at the Battle of Ganjgal, Afghanistan, Sept. 8, 2009. (Photo by J.D. Leipold)

In the aftermath of the battle, Swenson was critical of several senior Army officers who failed to provide the coverage and artillery requested of them at Forward Operating Base Joyce.

While Swenson and Marine Cpl. Dakota L. Meyer were both nominated for Medals of Honor by Marine Gen. John R. Allen, commander of the International Security Assistance Force at the time, only Meyer's MOH packet made it to the president. Meyer was awarded the medal at a White House ceremony, Sept. 15, 2011. Swenson resigned his commission earlier that year in February.

Secretary of the Army John McHugh acknowledged the errors in the submissions process of MOH packets and offered his apology and changes to the process.

"Will Swenson is truly a hero amongst heroes," he said. "Today he'll have his name enshrined along with those who have gone before, forever part of our nation and our Army's history and his name will be displayed alongside such others as Alvin York and Audie Murphy and Les Sabo. The reason I single out Les Sabo Jr. is that his story and Will's offer an uncommon and important lessons for our Army.

"In 1970, Les Sabo sacrificed his life in a faraway field in Cambodia, and he did so to save the lives of his fellow Soldiers," McHugh continued. "For more

than 40 years his story was all but lost outside of his family ... until a lawyer happened to stumble upon his records file in the National Archives ... and began to push anew for the Medal of Honor that should have been awarded decades earlier."

Sabo's company commander recommended the Medal of Honor and submitted a package through the chain of command, but it never reached Washington, D.C. In 1999, a Vietnam veteran of the 101st Airborne Division was researching information at the National Archives and found the documentation of Sabo's actions and citation. After moving through a maze of bureaucracy, including a special act of Congress, Sabo's widow received her husband's Medal of Honor in a White House ceremony, May 16, 2012 — 42 years after the action.

During the ceremony, McHugh acknowledged the Army had lost Swenson's Medal of Honor packet, and said he was implementing changes to ensure such an occurrence would not happen again.

A new directive now requires Medal of Honor nominations be sent immediately to Army Human Resources Command, known as HRC.

"As soon as an honors packet is created at battalion level, we will have immediate visibility at Army headquarters," the secretary said.

Each subsequent review of the package must also be forwarded to HRC. The command will also follow up with the original command every 30 days until that award packet reaches its final review.

“This will be a parallel process that will provide greater oversight,” McHugh said. The change, McHugh said, will improve how the Army takes care of its Soldiers.

“Our heroes have always taught us many things, and that’s true here today,” McHugh said. “But sometimes our heroes teach us how to make ourselves better, and Will, for that as well, I want to ‘thank you.’”

Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel also apologized for excessive delay in the award of Swenson’s Medal

of Honor: “We’re sorry that you and your family had to endure through that, but you did and you handled it right, and I think (that) deserves a tremendous amount of attention and credit.”

Following the presentation of his framed citation and the personal Medal of Honor flag, Swenson spoke briefly.

“I look at this crowd and I see the strength of a nation and I see the strength of a fighting force, one that I fought proudly with,” he said. “I look at my fellow Marines, Army, Navy and Air Force, a team that I fought side-by-side with as brothers. It’s the proudest moment of my life and I’m honored and privileged to know these men.” ■



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