



Former Staff Sgt. Ryan M. Pitts, Medal of Honor recipient, is inducted into the Hall of Heroes during a Pentagon ceremony July 22, 2014. (Photo by Lillian Boyd)

Medal of Honor Recipient Ryan Pitts Inducted into Hall of Heroes

By Lillian Boyd — Army News Service

Former Staff Sgt. Ryan Pitts was inducted into the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes yesterday, the day after receiving the Medal of Honor from President Barack Obama, for his bravery in combat at Vehicle Patrol Base Kahler, in Kunar Province, Afghanistan, July 13, 2008.

"While the Medal of Honor is awarded to an individual, it is anything but an individual achievement. It is ours, not mine," said Pitts. "I will wear it for everyone there that day, especially for those we couldn't bring home."

Pitts began his acceptance speech with a quote from Steven Pressfield's book "The Afghan Campaign," which he felt best embodied the dedication of his fellow Soldiers: "Of one thing I am certain. I will die before I let harm come to him. The shaft that impales him must first pass through my flesh."

The greatest men in military personified this passage: Men who placed themselves between their brothers and the enemy in order to protect and defend them, Pitts said.

"It was the men to our left and right that compelled us to fight with everything we had. There was an absolute

duty to be your brother's keeper. A sentiment that I think we all shared," he said.

Pitts served with 2nd Platoon, Chosen Company, 2nd Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade.

On the morning of July 13, at about 4 a.m., Pitts was manning Observation Post Topside, which was positioned east of the main base, and east of a bazaar and hotel complex in Wanat.

Soldiers identified potential insurgents. They put together a request for fire. But before approval, Soldiers heard an eruption of enemy fire.

They were hit with small arms fire, rocket-propelled grenades and hand grenades. Pitts and six other paratroopers were injured in the initial volley of enemy fire. Two paratroopers were killed. Pitts took grenade shrapnel in both legs and his left arm.

For more than an hour after, Pitts continued to fight and defend his position and his teammates, despite his injuries.

"I have thought about [those Soldiers] and their sacrifices every day. I will for the rest of my life and I am not alone. You raised, molded and loved incredible men. Many of the men present in this room are here because of their actions, actions that changed the course of history for us, actions that gave the rest of us a second chance," Pitts said.

"My son Lucas exists because of them, as do many other men's children," he added. "I promise that my son will grow up appreciating the actions of these men he never knew."

Those men were the nine who didn't return home: Spc. Sergio Abad, Cpl. Jonathan Ayers, Cpl. Jason Bogar, 1st Lt. Jonathan Brostrom, Sgt. Israel Garcia, Cpl. Jason Hovater, Cpl. Matthew Phillips, Cpl. Pruitt Rainey and Cpl. Gunnar Zwilling.

Army Chief of Staff Gen. Ray Odierno then recounted some of the events that day.

"Staff Sgt. Pitts' incredible physical and mental toughness, his determination and resilience, his ability to communicate with leadership while under heavy fire allowed U.S. forces to hold the OP, which turned the tide of battle," he said.

Without Pitts' efforts, the enemy would have gained a foothold on high ground and inflicted significantly greater casualties onto the vehicle patrol base, and the enemy could have been in possession of the fallen Soldiers at the observation post, Odierno concluded.

Secretary of the Army John M. McHugh also spoke:

"These men were committed to one another; they were committed to their uncommon lives and equally their common challenge," he said. "And just like any true family, love and trust laid at the heart of it all.

"Now it might seem odd to some to speak of love and trust when recounting the brave and bold actions of such rough and tumble warriors. But, make no mistake, their love for each other was real," McHugh continued. "Even, as it was, in the midst of indescribable chaos.

"To be sure, on the day of the Wanat attack, Ryan Pitts was wearing the KIA bracelet bearing the name of Sgt. 1st Class Matthew Kahler, as you heard, a platoon sergeant of 2nd platoon, who had died just months earlier. Ryan unabashedly said that Kahler 'loved his Soldiers. Each and every one of them, [he] loved them

like they were his own kids.' Of that I have no doubt," said McHugh.

"At the height of the Battle of Wanat, (Spc. Michael) Denton and three other Soldiers scrambled up the bullet-rocked terraces of OP Topside to reinforce the position where, as the chief told you, Ryan had been alone, fighting off the enemy single handedly," McHugh said. "Ryan had no idea the four were coming."

The scene was awful, Denton later recalled. He found the body of his "best bud," Spc. Jason Hovater, lying there, lifeless.

"I took ammo from Hovater's body, and told him I loved him," Denton said.

Denton then went on to man a machine gun.

Moments later, after another barrage of RPGs tore into the OP, wounding all five of the men, Sgt. Israel Garcia lie mortally wounded. Ryan pulled his close friend to him, his brother. And knowing there was nothing he could do for him, he just laid there and held his hand.

"We just talked for a while," Ryan said. "He told me he wanted me to tell his mom and wife that he loved them." Pitts later honored that commitment.

"So, through all of the chaos, through all of the destruction, we can clearly see that love, even in the face of such tragedy, bonds these men and their families," McHugh said. "And believe it or not, just as it is on the home front, love and trust are the foundations of this incredible professional American Army.

"Not surprisingly, today's Soldiers trust each other, they trust the Army and those who fill its ranks, and they also understand the moral dimensions of war," he said. "I've heard the chief speak often about the issue of trust. It's the backbone of our professional Army. It's what defines our profession of arms.

"Ryan has said he trusted everyone around him," McHugh said. "That he'd follow his officers anywhere. That he knew help would come, if humanly possible. He knew it, because he knew he would do the same. He trusted the skills of the Apache helicopter pilots who flew and fired danger close to his embattled position.

"Love and trust abounds in this Army amongst the men in women who wear the uniform. And we have men like the "Chosen Few" truly to thank for it," the secretary concluded. ■

NCO JOURNAL

<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

