

Staff Sergeant Awarded Soldier's Medal after Risking Life to Save Fisherman

By Clifford Kyle Jones - NCO Journal

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One day in June 2014, Staff Sgt. Joshaua J. Schneiderman had already hit the great outdoors of Alaska 10 days after a double hernia operation, pulled a motorist and his truck out of a river crossing and made his first dip-netting fishing trip to the treacherous Copper River. Then he did something really impressive.

The then-brigade fire support NCO for the 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division saw a fisherman who had fallen into the river. Schneiderman ran to his truck to grab a life vest. He returned and threw it to the fisherman, but when that wasn't enough to pull the man from the river's powerful currents, he ran along the riverbank until it ended then waded in and pulled the fisherman out.

After reaching the end of the riverbank, "I took two more steps, and I just jumped in after him, because there was no more beach left," Schneiderman said. "If I didn't get this guy right now, nobody was going to get him. ... I reached out with one arm and I grabbed him, and we were able to get fingertip contact. With my left arm, I held onto a rock sitting on top of the water. My waders started filling up with water and the current was pulling me out. But we were able to finally lock hands and I collected everything I could possibly muster up and I was able to pull him and myself back to shore."





Staff Sgt. Joshaua Schneiderman, a forward observer with 2nd Battalion, 377th Parachute Field Artillery Regiment, 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division salutes Maj. Gen. Bryan Owens, commanding general of U.S. Army Alaska, during an awards ceremony at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska. Schneiderman was awarded the Soldier's Medal for risking his life during the rescue of a fellow fisherman from rapid waters in June 2014. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Brian Ragin)

For risking his life in the rescue, Schneiderman was awarded the Soldier's Medal, the highest honor a Soldier can be awarded for valor outside of combat, at a ceremony last month at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska.

Before the rescue, though, Schneiderman was just an avid outdoorsman on his first dip-netting trip to Alaska's Copper River with his wife and some of the other Soldiers from his brigade's S3 operations section.

Dip-netting involves using a net held open by a hoop attached to a long handle. Because of Alaska's cold, glacier-fed riverwater and the glacial silt that makes riverbed terrain tenuous, dip-netting can be a treacherous venture. And few places are more dangerous than the Copper River, with its fast-moving currents and silt-packed water.

Schneiderman had been dip-netting at Alaska's tamer Kenai River several times, but lured by the famed "Copper River reds" — among the world's most sought-after salmon — he and his wife and friends headed east to the notoriously perilous south-central Alaska river.

Only 10 days before the outing, Schneiderman had a double hernia operation. His doctors had cleared him for the trip, but he hadn't completely recovered.

The Copper River "is probably the width of your average freeway," Schneiderman said. "It's very wide, very fast-moving, very dangerous. I had seen this guy screaming, flailing his arms, halfway into the river. ... When I saw him, he was already up to his chin in the water."

Schneiderman had the life vest ready in his truck, because "my wife and I had heard horror stories, so we prepared for the worst." As he raced down the river bank to try to keep up with the fisherman being swept away, he said, "I could almost feel every stitch splitting" from his recent surgery.

Despite the pain even before he leapt into the river to rescue the fisherman, Schneiderman said he never thought about his own safety.

"I just reacted. I saw a guy who needed help and I just went. I went into action mode. I never once thought about me," he said. "I have 63 months of combat experience as a forward observer, and you just do, you know what I mean? You just react. There was no thinking."

Schneiderman said he didn't expect anything further to come from the rescue, except some good-natured ribbing from his co-workers. He had pulled a man and his truck out of a smaller river on the way to the dip-netting excursion, "so after I saved the dip-netter, it was a running joke. "You overachiever," they told him. Or asked, jokingly, "Two in one day?"

But when Chief Warrant Officer 3 Kevin Colegrove heard the story from Schneiderman and his co-workers, Colegrove knew it was much more than a joke.

"He didn't think it was a big deal at all, and I was like, no, that's a big deal," Colegrove said.

After speaking with Schneiderman and getting a written description of the events, Colegrove asked for writeups from each of the Soldiers who witnessed the rescue. Colegrove believed Schneiderman had earned himself a Soldier's Medal for risking his life to save another.

The process took a year and a half, and "not too many people get the Soldier's Medal, so I didn't give it any thought, ..." Schneiderman said. "Next thing I know, I'm standing on the stage receiving the Soldier's Medal."

Colegrove, who has worked with Schneiderman for about five years, said it's typical of the staff sergeant to downplay his accomplishments.

"He's a real good NCO, always takes care of his Soldiers, always tries to help everybody else out, very knowledgeable, very good at his job,"

Colegrove said. "He has Bronze Stars and stuff like that, too, so obviously he has a trend in the past of doing stuff like this. This one just happened to happen not in a wartime situation but in peacetime."

The Soldier's Medal will likely cap Schneiderman's career. The 21-year veteran filed his retirement paperwork last month. He plans to stay in Alaska and work on the service side of the oil industry.

"It's an outdoorsman's paradise," he said of the state. "I mean, you can hunt and fish here all year long. You can even trap. And I'm an avid hunter and fisherman."

Schneiderman said he's already told his command he doesn't want a retirement ceremony; he's too humble for that. However, he understood that being awarded the Soldier's Medal was something special.

"I understand this was bigger than me and that's why we had the ceremony," he said.

Colegrove said Schneiderman's whole brigade was deeply involved in the ceremony and took pride in the staff sergeant being honored, and leadership from the two-star headquarters and the Air Force, which operates the joint base, attended the ceremony.

"This is definitely a great way to go out," Schneiderman said, "especially because I'm going to leave on a positive note."