



Chairman Celebrates Unsung Heroes at ‘Angels of Battlefield’ Gala

By John J. Kruzel
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WASHINGTON, March 6, 2008 – The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff praised the Army medics and Navy corpsmen who risk their lives on the battlefield to save others at the 2nd annual Armed Services YMCA gala here last night.



Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and retired Navy Rear Adm. S. Frank Gallo, national executive director, Armed Services YMCA, present the Angels of the Battlefield Award to Navy Seaman Elvis H. Gichini during a gala dinner in honor of military medics and corpsmen at the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington, D.C., March 5, 2008. Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Chad J. McNeeley, USN

Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, who had returned yesterday morning from visiting deployed troops, related a poignant aspect of his trip to the more than 200 people in attendance.

“Less than 48 hours ago, I was on a high mountain in Afghanistan with about 15 soldiers in one of the toughest areas we have right now in the fight that we’re in,” Mullen said. “There was one individual in this group who ... stood out, and it was the medic.”

Below the melting snow-capped mountaintop, the chairman spoke with the unit, which had lost seven soldiers since deploying to Afghanistan almost a year ago. The surviving soldiers resolved to continue their mission, Mullen said, in part because of the confidence instilled in the soldiers by the man tasked with keeping them alive.

“You could see in how (the medic) talked and how they talked about him, how special he was, how much they depend on him and how confident they were they could carry out their mission because he was there,” Mullen said.

U.S. soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen are supported by the best combat medical staff the country has ever seen, the chairman said, citing two exemplary medics.

As a young man in Bronx, N.Y., Angelo J. Vaccaro had led a misdirected life, with bad influences, drug use and brushes with the law. In 2004, however, Vaccaro decided to turn his life around and enlisted as a combat medic after the Army granted him a waiver.

“He joined the Army to save himself,” Mullen said. “As a medic, he, in turn, consciously chose to save others.”

A firefight erupted around Vaccaro’s unit on Oct. 3, 2004. Plunging headlong into the engagement, the medic was killed while attempting to evacuate his wounded comrades. He is the first servicemember to earn two Silver Star Medals in the global terror war.

“In an effort to save his soldiers -- in doing what was right in life -- he courageously faced his death,” Mullen said. “And we honor him as we have so many tonight, and the legions of combat medics who came before him and the many who will surely follow.”

As insurgents ambushed the front of his convoy, and with explosions going off on the road ahead of him, Navy hospital corpsman Petty Officer 3rd Class Joshua Chiarini could have remained in his vehicle and waited for the action to pass. Instead, he bolted from his truck and joined the battle.

Chiarini’s ensuing gallantry resulted in a Silver Star and the recovery of several wounded Marines from the line of fire, saving their lives. “He was in the company of the angels in the battlefield,” Mullen said, referring to the combat medics who served before Chiarini.

In a recorded video message to the audience, former Kansas Sen. Bob Dole expressed “everlasting appreciation” for combat medics, like those who cared for him after he suffered injuries from German machine-gun fire during World War II.

“Our Army medics and Navy corpsmen ... are and always have been the unsung heroes of our country’s effort to defend liberty and freedom,” he said. “If you’re one of those touched by these courageous men and women, as I was, you’ll have an everlasting appreciation for they do in times of personal crisis.”

Servicemembers accepted an award on behalf of their fellow corpsmen and medics. Recipients included Army Sgt. Maria Jimenez, Navy Seaman Elvis Gichini, Navy Petty Officer 3rd Class Joel Grey, Air Force Senior Airman Jaime Kincaid, Coast Guard Petty Officer 3rd Class Victoria Hayes, Army Reserve Sgt. Jeana Johnson, Navy Reserve Petty Officer 1st Class Sean Baney and Air National Guard Tech. Sgt. Lance Burgess.

The evening’s master of ceremonies -- retired Marine Col. H.C. “Barney” Barnum Jr., a Medal of Honor recipient who now serves as deputy assistant secretary of the Navy for reserve affairs -- said every servicemember reveres his “doc.”

“Our corpsmen and medics carry the scars of battles won and battles lost, deep in their souls, unseen to men,” he said. “Not the battles of bullets flying back and forth, but the battles of life and death on the face in front of them and all around them.”