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Fallen Navy SEAL Enshrined in Pentagon's Hall of Heroes

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WASHINGTON, April 9, 2008 – Petty Officer 2nd Class Michael A. Monsoor, a Navy SEAL who posthumously received the Medal of Honor yesterday for his heroic actions in Iraq, joined a rarefied fraternity of military heroes at the Pentagon today.

In September 2006, Monsoor leaped onto a grenade and used his body to absorb a blast that likely would have killed two fellow SEALs and several Iraqi soldiers. For his heroism, the Defense Department today enshrined Monsoor's name alongside the 3,446 other Medal of Honor recipients honored in its Hall of Heroes.

"To stand in this room, surrounded by reminders of greatness, of sacrifice and of heroism almost beyond comprehension, shakes the soul and stirs the heart," Navy Secretary Donald C. Winter told the audience inside the Hall of Heroes.

Monsoor, a 25 year-old machine gunner with SEAL Team 3, was providing security in Ramadi, Iraq, at a sniper lookout post on Sept. 29, 2006, when a fragmentation grenade hit his chest and bounced to the floor. Positioned next to the single exit, only Monsoor could have escaped harm.

Instead, he threw himself onto the grenade. Monsoor used his body to absorb the blast and shield two nearby SEALs. The SEALs and eight Iraqi soldiers survived, some with wounds, others unscathed.

Thirty minutes later, Monsoor died.

"He had a clear path to safety," Winter said. "But he chose a different path, a path of honor that embodies the way of a Navy SEAL."

When Monsoor was assigned to Ramadi, it was the most dangerous city in the world for an American servicemember, said Navy Adm. Eric Olson, commander of U.S. Special Operations Command.

Monsoor and his unit received hostile fire on 75 percent of their missions, and many believed the entire Anbar province -- home to Ramadi and other fiercely contentious cities -- was "irrevocably lost to a growing insurgency," Olson said.

"At that time, in that place, what was needed most was brave and highly trained men with guns, determination and discipline," he said. "Navy SEALs ... answered the call, and Michael Monsoor was the best of them."

Army Lt. Col. Ronald Clark, Monsoor's former commanding officer, said the petty officer and his unit embodied the strength and courage of the unified fight against the enemy.

Their efforts, he said, helped foster what is known as the "Anbar Awakening," a societal purging of extremism by a coalition-Anbari alliance that ushered in a level of stability unprecedented since U.S. operations in Iraq began.

"Mikey's valor and selfless service will continue to inspire legions of brave Americans," said Army Lt. Col. Ronald Clark, former commander of the 101st Airborne Division's 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment. "He'll inspire brave men and women to take up arms to protect our country and our way of life.

"He'll continue to inspire us all, because his spirit is forever woven in the fabric of a grateful nation who will never forget him or his sacrifice to save the lives of his brothers on that rooftop," he continued. "We are honored by his life, humbled by his courage and blessed to have served in the company of a hero."

Family members of the slain SEAL wept and clutched each other in a ceremony packed with servicemembers of all branches and rank who gathered to pay homage to the fourth servicemember to receive the Medal of Honor since the beginning of operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

George and Sally Monsoor, the fallen petty officer's parents, accepted the decoration on their son's behalf during a White House ceremony yesterday. The Medal of Honor, awarded for gallantry in combat exceeding the call of duty, is the nation's highest military decoration.

President Bush yesterday characterized Monsoor, a native of Long Beach, Calif., as an unlikely candidate for the SEALs. As a child, he suffered from asthma attacks and coughing fits that routinely landed him in the hospital, Bush said.

But the asthmatic child resolved to wean himself off his inhaler, strengthening his lungs by challenging his siblings in swimming races. The determined child grew into a young man who eventually completed SEAL training, which Bush called the "ultimate test of physical endurance."

"Less than a third of those who begin this training become SEALs," he said. "But Mike would not be denied a spot."

Providing historical context for the decoration today, Deputy Defense Secretary Gordon R. England told the audience the Medal of Honor is earned through actions so courageous they dwarf all other forms of bravery.

“It must put the recipient’s life at risk. It must be the type of deed, which had it not been done, the recipient would not be subject to criticism,” he told the audience today. “It, and its recipients, are genuine national treasures.”

England said war brings to the fore the best and worst human qualities. “Michael Monsoor showed us, again and again, on the violent battlefields of Iraq, and in every step of his young life, the very best we can be,” he said.