

US Army Office of Public Affairs | Ryan Pitts Medal of Honor Press Conference

Ladies and gentlemen, good morning and thanks for being here today. We're just going to give you a few guidelines before we start the question and answer with Sergeant Pitts. Most importantly we have a microphone here center stage. Today's press conferences being streamed live of the Pentagon channel. So just as a way to hear your questions clearly, if you come up to them I can ask your question. We've set aside a block of two hours, but we think will be on a little before that. We just wanted to give everyone enough time to ask a few questions. Now I'd like to introduce Sergeant Ryan Pitts.

Good morning. Thank you all for coming today and for your interest in our story. I would like to say a few words and then open the floor for questions. While it is an honor to have been nominated for the award, it is not mine alone. The honor belongs to every man who fought at Vehicle Patrol Base Kahler, especially to those who made the ultimate sacrifice allowing the rest of us to return home. I have an absolute responsibility to tell our story because there are nine men who cannot and it is their names that you should know.

Specialist Sergio Abad, Corporal Jonathan Ayers, Corporal Jason Bogar, First Lieutenant Jonathan Brostrom, Sergeant Israel Garcia, Corporal Jason Hovater, Corporal Matthew Phillips, Corporal Pruitt Rainey, and Corporal Gunnar Zwilling. We all answered the call, and chosen company became our families. We were dedicated to each other. The life of the man next to you was more important than your own, which is most greatly exemplified by the fall.

I reflect on the courage displayed that day, and I am in awe of the men I served with. Corporal Bogar only stopped returning fire to treat casualties, myself included. Lieutenant Brostrom and Corporal Hovater braved direct enemy fire to reinforce OP topside, an act Sergeant Samaroo, Sergeant Garcia, Specialist Denton, and Specialist Sones would repeat. Sergeant Chavez was shot through both legs as he helped pull a mortally-wounded Specialist Abad to cover.

Corporal Ayers was struck in the helmet by an enemy round and continued to man a machine gun until the end because we needed it. Specialist Scantlin moved around the battlefield, treating casualties, after all the medics had been wounded. Captain Seipel and Chief Hill landed their medevac helicopter between OP topside and the enemy. Sergeant Kinney departed that bird to help casualties. Private First

Class Krupa, Specialist Hamby, Sergeant Santiago, and many others returned fire from gun trucks despite accurate incoming RPG fire, which destroyed the tow missile truck. And there's so much more.

I view the Medal of Honor as an award it into an individual that represents our collective efforts. Valor was everywhere, we carried the day together. To me, the Medal represents the sacrifices of our team, and all service members, and is a memorial to all those who have laid down their lives for our country. I owe it to them to live a life worthy of their sacrifice. I would now like take your questions. Thank you.

You mentioned that these men who served with you were your family. You felt there were a family. Why is that so?

Combat creates bonds like I've never seen before, and after 14 months in combat, we just got to know each other so well. We could tell who we were, we could tell our friends in the dark, just by the way that they walked. And we were ready to lay down our lives for each other.

Honor to meet you. Is this with you all the time? I mean, obviously you are no longer in the service. You're living what we would call a civilian life now. Is it with you all the time? Can you move beyond it, or do you even want to not stop thinking about it? How does it stay with you in your life?

I've thought about every day since July 13. I don't want to forget about it. I think I've learned to manage it, but I take comfort somehow in the pain of that loss, because it reminds me they meant something to me, and I never want to forget that. And I appreciate the sacrifices they made for us.

Sergeant, we've seen the descriptions of the action that day. I'm interested in what was going on in your mind. How do you prepare yourself mentally for that kind of situation, and what's the thought process as you're experiencing it?

I don't know as if there's much to mentally prepare yourself beyond the training and the bonds that we have. Going through my head that day was just I needed to do what needed to be done, just like every other man. Everybody was doing what they could in fact the battle, because it was a needed.

Sergeant, can you talk a little bit about life today and what you've been up to since that time.

I graduated college from University of New Hampshire last spring. I have a one-year-old son and a two year wedding anniversary coming up next month. There's a lot of guys that that's the path they've followed. It's great to look around and see my friends going home and enjoying their lives. And there

are many that continued to serve. And I have a lot of respect for them.

You were hit in your chest, both legs, and an arm. Tell us first, what the pain was like, and how you found the ability to go on.

There wasn't any pain at first. It was just shock, and when I crawled to the southern fighting position and saw Bogar returning fire, and raining, and everybody else running around, doing what needed to be done-- and the volume of fire coming in-- for me I just knew I had to participate. I had to do what I could help out. I couldn't just sit there and let them bear the burden.

Your face really lit up when you talked about your one-year-old son. Would you be OK if he entered the military?

I want that to be his decision. I'll be very proud if he chooses-- I would love that. But I want him to follow his own path. I hope that he believes and understands that, as an American, he has a duty to defend his country. But I'll be happy with whatever path he follows as long as it's making him happy.

The place you stationed in Afghanistan, it sounded like the most remote, dangerous spot on the Earth from some of the descriptions that I read. Do you ever, in being out of the military for the short period of time now-- do you think back to the importance of the mission and question it in any way, the mission in Afghanistan?

I've never questioned the mission. My mission was to defend our country and execute our commander's intent. And I'm comfortable with that.

There was also that dramatic moment in the story where one of your comrades is dying. Most of us just seen that in the movies. Somebody's mortally wounded, they're lying there and they're actually able to talk, and to tell somebody to convey a message. Could you describe that again so if you don't mind?

It was Sergeant Israel Garcia. He was severely wounded. I remember very clearly. It was all I can do to comfort him was to just-- there wasn't anything we could do for him, other than for me to give him the guarantee that I would come home and tell his wife and mom that he loved them. He was thinking of them has last moments.

I know you were injured as well. Were you aware of how badly you were hurt while you were trying to

fight back, and would you mind speaking to the efforts of the men they came to help aid you afterwards?

I wasn't certain how serious my injuries were. I knew we wanted to get a tourniquet on my right leg. Bogar put that on my right leg, just because-- the worry, the concern that I might have hit a major blood vessel. But Lieutenant Brostrom and Corporal Hovater, they really did break direct enemy fire. They ran through the center of the village to reinforce the OP. And I honestly don't know how they made it. And then even later when a number of men had already been killed and wounded at the OP, Sergeant Sam, Sergeant Garcia, Denton and Sones still came. And even after that wave, there were more guys towards the end of my time there-- before I was medevaced-- that the guys were just pouring up to the OP to reinforce and do what they could.

To people haven't heard and specifically what occurred that day, can you describe the sequence of events and what went through your mind as events unfolded?

I mean honestly, it's a blur from the beginning of the fight, from that opening first to being wounded. It was just every man fighting with everything they had. And then finally the Apaches, our first platoon, was able to get there. The tide seemed to start to turn.

And please describe the reaction when you heard that you were to be honored with a Medal of Honor.

When I first heard it-- that it had been upgraded a number of years ago-- I wasn't happy about it, never felt that I deserved it. But since then I've accepted the fact that this isn't mine. It belongs to everybody who was there that day, because we did it together. I didn't do any more than anybody else.

It was a report that there were some soldiers who were reprimanded that were under attack. Is there truth to that? Was the military revised their opinion of what went on that day?

Those letters of reprimand rescinded for Colonel William Ostlund and Major Matt Myer. And I have complete confidence in their leadership ability. And I would follow them anywhere.

The United States is pulling out of Afghanistan, and I'm sure you read the papers and you know that we pulled out of Iraq and now that country is headed toward civil war. Do you worry that might happen in Afghanistan? If you had the ear of the President, what would you tell him to do?

Those are certainly questions probably better directed to the Department of Defense. And I was in the

tactical level. Those things were really things I thought about.

It's an easy question but a hard question. Were you ever scared?

I know for myself and I would probably venture to say this is the same for many other soldiers and service members, that my two biggest fears were always said I would let down my buddies or that one of them would be hurt. Now I would say that day wasn't very different.

First an easy one Sergeant, what's your son's name?

My son's name is Lucas.

Lucas. Is that L-U-C-A-S or K-A-S?

C. C-A-S.

Secondly, how have you changed since 2008, since July, 2008?

I don't know as if I have that much. I think the biggest thing that's changed is, I know that I've been given a gift, and I think I have an appreciation of life that I probably didn't have before. And know now that I'm going to live my life for those that aren't here because I owe it to them. They gave me this gift and I'm not going to waste it.

You walked up here pretty well. Are there any lingering injuries? Do full court basketball or ski in the winter?

I try to stay away from running. That's not great. For the most part, I'm good. But I have a lot of friends, and there are a lot of other service members that have injuries that are far more serious than mine. I try to keep that in mind.

What's it like to get a phone call at your house from the President?

It was-- I still don't know what to think. It doesn't seem real. I don't remember much of what he said, I just remember me saying, "thank you Mr. President, yes, sir," a whole bunch of, 'OK, you have a good day too, sir." So that's pretty much all I remember.

Did you have any advance warning that he was going to call?

I did.

What time of the day was it?

It was the morning.

So you're going down in July. Have you ever been to the White House before?

I have. Last month I was fortunate enough to attend Kyle White's Medal of Honor ceremony. He was in Chosen Company, first platoon.

I'm from the Lowell Sun. John Collins. I understand you went to Souhegan High School too, so might have ran into you 10 years ago when you were in school still. But do you have Lowell ties, did you grow up there? We heard you were a Lowell native.

I grew up there very briefly. I don't really have any ties there. I claim New Hampshire as home.

Mount Vernon?

Yeah.

Sergeant, you've joined a very exclusive club. Have you've heard from any of the other members, and what are the lessons that they're trying to teach you about how to carry this medal?

I've spoken to Kyle White because he's a friend and another recipient. And just trying to keep in mind-- just take it a day at a time, and realize that there are responsibilities that accompany the award.

What are those responsibilities?

To represent service members and tell our story. To tell a story the minute I was with. To honor the award. You never want to bring any sort of disgrace on the award.

You're a man of few words, right Ryan? Mostly? Are you a new kind of dreading having to retell this for the rest of your life? Because as we noted, it's-- few people have received this honor and yet here you are. You didn't ask for it, but now until you're an elderly man, you'll be asked to retell that story.

I'm not dreading it I guess. I appreciate the opportunity to tell our story. And it's probably what I want to

do most, but it's also the thing that's the most difficult to do.

Sergeant, why did you join the Army? I didn't know what I wanted to do after high school. I had always wanted to serve but got caught up in high school with the things the adolescent teenage boys get caught up in, when it came time to really start thinking about what I wanted to do, I thought the military was a great way to serve my country and figure it out. And I've never regretted it.

One of my colleagues in the Globe wrote a great story. Cooking grenades, that's when you pull the pin and wait a few seconds before you throw it so they can throw it back. How do you practice that? Is that something that you did for the first time in battle? Or was that-- to happen?

That was the first time I ever did it in combat with a live grenade. I'd actually practiced it in basic training, went through a grenade training course. And that's where I first learned about it.

Was it a live grenade in practice?

No. It was a dummy grenade.

How many times did you do that in the fire fight?

At least three, probably more.

At any point in the retelling the story, people must ask you, how many of the enemy did you get, personally? Is that something you would know?

No. I have no idea.

Primarily, you were calling in reinforcements, too, while you were under fire?

I was relaying information to Major Myer who was our company commander at the time. Captain Myer at the time.

Is there anybody else that was in the fight that is also deserving of the Medal of Honor in your mind?

That's something that my-- I wasn't nominated for it originally. My commanders have-- that decision was never mine. Like I said, I don't think of this as mine. It belongs to us. We earned it together.

Probably more of just a technical question, but how did the battle end? Did the Taliban forces retreat, or

were they destroyed? Did you guys end up getting evacuated? Can you tell us about that?

I was evacuated before the end of the battle, but they eventually withdrew and they were pursued, both by soldiers and air craft.

I know you mentioned that it was a blur, but do you remember what the night was like before you saw the enemies come out?

It seemed like any other night. It was quiet. The only thing different about that morning was that the locals didn't come up to the fields to work, that was probably about the only thing that seemed different and odd.

How many other battles did you do in your '14 months? And I guess this was your last day and then you're going to ship. Could you tell me about that? How do you feel about that, was it ironic? Did you ever think that was going to happen?

It wasn't in my last day. That was probably within the last three weeks of our deployment. But it's one of those things. There's no pause in combat. You're not done until you leave the country. We were OK. I'm OK with that.

How many other battles had you been in in your 14 months?

I don't-- more than one. But that was the nature of that area. Our company wasn't the only one that saw a fight. Battle Company, which has been the movie Restrepo and upcoming Korangal. Our Able Company-- every company saw fighting. So we weren't alone in that, and we certainly weren't the only wants to see fierce fighting. I think every unit did. Every company lost a soldier.

Any thoughts of reupping? Or you figured you were done.

For me, my injuries-- I knew that I couldn't perform at the level that I would want to. And that was kind of it for me.

If you could have, would you have?

Yes I would've. I love the military. It was greatest thing I've ever done in my life. And it was the honor of my lifetime to serve with those guys. I would do it all again.

Sergeant, I don't want to be too repetitive. I know you're very humble, but can you walk us through a little bit again about the course of events and what you were about to do that night.

From the initial onset of the battle, I was wounded in the opening volley of RPGs and hand grenades that came into the OP. Really, at that time I was, little shell-shocked, and the other guys that weren't-- like Rainey and Ayers and McKaig and Bogar are continuing to fight, and then I finally moved to the southern position and got a little bit of treatment. And then, after Stafford came there and said that Zwilling and Phillips had been killed, and he thought that they throwing hand grenades, that I thought-- if we're within hand grenade range for them, they're within hand grenade range for us. So then I moved back out. From that point on, I was just trying to keep up with what everybody else was doing. That's what motivated me. That's why I really don't think that I did anything differently than anybody else.

And also can you talk a little bit the specific injuries you sustained?

Yep. The most serious injuries were to-- my right leg took shrapnel. Peppered all over my right leg, my backside, some to my left leg, left Achilles, left hip, left arm, and I took a little bit of shrapnel to my forehead, but it was mainly superficial.

And today would you say you're fully recuperated from those physical injuries?

I would say I'm fully recuperated. They did a phenomenal job at Walter Reed, putting us back together and so many other service members, that it's amazing.

Did you think you were going to die?

When I realized I was alone, I thought I was going to die. I thought it was my time. But my biggest concern is that I knew that I didn't want to be taken alive.

Do you remember how long the battle lasted?

I was only there for an hour and a half to two hours. But it went well on after that.

Would you describe that one and a half, two hours as the most defining moment of your life?

I would say so, in the way that I've processed and just-- what I saw the guys do. Whenever I'm having a tough day and I think things are hard, I just try and think of what everybody went through that day and

then the guys who don't get to have tough days anymore. I try not to complain.

At any point in the battle, when you were under fire, did you hearken back to anything that you were taught in training, from a particular commanding officer, a piece of advice, maybe, that helps you in that time?

Consciously, no, but it's there. I was exposed to so many phenomenal leaders and other soldiers that-- I did a tour previous to that with guys that did the combat jump into Iraq. And I always looked at the guys who came before me, and was like, I'm never going to be as good as they are. And certainly, they all impacted me, whether it's Sergeant Kahler, who was killed in January that year. I think back on previous commanders that I had, such as Major [INAUDIBLE], Sergeant Major [INAUDIBLE] now, other platoon sergeants-- just everybody that I've ever served with. Not even just leaders. Peers and subordinates. I think that's something that Sergeant Kahler taught me, was that good ideas can come from anywhere. You can learn anything. You can learn valuable information from anyone. So when I think about the battle like that, I feel like every leader I ever had or everybody I ever served with was there with us.

Do you have any plans to place the Medal of Valor on display your house? Or do you think you might do with it?

I haven't given that any thought. I'm taking it one day at a time.

Did you join the American Legion or VFW? Done other kinds of veteran things?

I am a lifetime member the VFW. I haven't joined the American Legion. Member of the 173rd Airborne Association.

This might be going allow ourselves to, but if you thought about what you might tell Lucas when time comes about that day?

I don't want to tell him about my experiences. I want to tell them about what the other guys did. And he's going to grow up knowing some of the men that were there with me that day. I still keep in very close touch with some of them. And I want him to know that he's here because of their actions. It's the only reason he's here. Because a lot of those guys saved my life. And there's probably a lot of other men there that wouldn't be here if it weren't for them in their actions. Guys like Lieutenant Brostrom,

and Corporal Hovater, and everybody the OP, and a lot of other men, too, that did come home. It's not an understatement when I say valor was everywhere.

You talked about how-- is it Sergeant Garcia and his dying words-- and about talking to his mother-- and he wanted you to talk to his mother and his wife. Did you end up doing that? And what was that like?

I was able to speak with Lesly Garcia and Maricruz when I went back to Italy for the return ceremonies, and it was certainly emotionally challenging. But I owed it to him. And I'm glad that I was able to carry out his last wishes. What was really important is that his family knew he was thinking of them in his last moments and that he loved them-- not anything to do at my level of discomfort.

Thank you very much, sir. Before you step down, would it be possible for your wife to join you on stage?

Your name, please, miss?

Amy.

You go by Pitts, Amy?

Yes I do.

Where's the baby?

He's in daycare.

How does it feel to have a Medal of Honor recipient for a husband?

So far still a nominee, but it's incredible. It's amazing.

How do you feel about this whole experience?

It's overwhelming. Just taking it day by day, go through all of it together and take it in stride.

Thank you.

We will have time for one more question, so if you've got one, go ahead and ask it. And otherwise, we'll wrap things up and Sergeant Pitts will give a quick closing statement. And I want to thank everyone for

coming here today and being here. And we look forward to July 21 down in Washington.

No more questions?

You gave us some names at some point. You mentioned a lieutenant, Corporal Power, I think. Kyle. Could you give me their full names?

So the fallen were specialist Sergio Abad, Corporal Jonathan Ayers, Corporal Jason Bogar, First Lieutenant Jonathan Brostrom, Sergeant Israel Garcia, Corporal Jason Hovater, Corporal Matthew Phillips, Corporal Pruitt Rainey, and Corporal Gunnar Zwilling.

I have those.

Thank you very much for coming here today and taking an interest in our story. It certainly is our story, not mine. This award belongs to every man that was there that day, and I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for them. And it was the honor of my lifetime to serve with them. Thank you.