

Administration of Barack Obama, 2013

Remarks on Presenting the Congressional Medal of Honor to Captain William D. Swenson

October 15, 2013

Good afternoon, everybody. Please have a seat. On behalf of Michelle and myself, welcome to the White House.

Last month, the United States Army released a remarkable piece of video. It's from the combat helmet cameras of a medevac helicopter crew in Afghanistan. And it's shaky, and it's grainy, but it takes us to the front lines that our troops face every single day, and it's useful to remember that there is still a whole lot of our troops in Afghanistan in harm's way. In that video, as the helicopter touches down by a remote village, you see, out of a cloud of dust, an American soldier. He's without his helmet, standing in the open, exposing himself to enemy fire, standing watch over a severely wounded soldier.

He helps carry that wounded soldier to the helicopter and places him inside. And then, amidst the whipping wind and the deafening roar of the helicopter blades, he does something unexpected. He leans in and kisses the wounded soldier on the head, a simple act of compassion and loyalty to a brother in arms. And as the door closes and the helicopter takes off, he turns and goes back the way he came, back into the heat of battle.

In our Nation's history, we have presented our highest military decoration, the Medal of Honor, nearly 3,500 times for actions above and beyond the call of duty. But this may be the first time that we can actually bear witness to a small fraction of those actions for ourselves. And today we honor the American in that video—the soldier who went back in—Captain William Swenson.

And not far away that day was then-Corporal Dakota Meyer, to whom we presented the Medal of Honor 2 years ago. Today is only the second time in nearly half a century that the Medal of Honor has been awarded to two survivors of the same battle. Dakota is not here today, but I wanted to welcome some of the soldiers and marines who fought alongside both these men—and the families of those who gave their lives that day.

I want to welcome all of our distinguished guests, including members of the Medal of Honor Society, whose ranks today grow by one more. Most of all, I want to welcome Will's wonderful parents Julia and Carl and Will's girlfriend Kelsey. Had a chance to visit with them. Both Carl and Julia are former college professors, so instead of a house full of GI Joes, Will grew up in Seattle surrounded by educational games. *[Laughter]* I'm told that even when Will was little, his mom was always a stickler for grammar, always making sure he said "to whom" instead of "to who." *[Laughter]* So I'm going to be very careful today. *[Laughter]*

I just had a chance to spend some time with them, and I have to say, Will is a pretty low-key guy. His idea of a good time isn't a big ceremony like this one. He'd rather be somewhere up in the mountains or on a trail, surrounded by cedar trees instead of cameras. But I think our Nation needs this ceremony today. Moments like this, Americans like Will, remind us of what our country can be at its best: a nation of citizens who look out for one another, who meet our obligations to one another, not just when it's easy, but also when it's hard. Maybe especially when it's hard.

Will, you're an example to everyone in this city and to our whole country of the professionalism and patriotism that we should strive for—whether we wear uniform or not—not just on particular occasions, but all the time.

For those who aren't familiar with the story of the battle that led Will to be here today, I want to take you back to that September morning 4 years ago. It's around sunrise. A column of Afghan soldiers and their American advisers are winding their way up a narrow trail towards a village to meet with elders. But just as the first soldier reaches the outskirts of the village, all hell breaks loose.

Almost instantly, four Americans—three marines, one Navy—at the front of the column are surrounded. Will and the soldiers in the center of the column are pinned down. Rocket-propelled grenades, mortar, machine gun fire—all of this is pouring in from three sides.

As he returns fire, Will calls for air support. But his initial requests are denied; Will and his team are too close to the village. And then Will learns that his noncommissioned officer, Sergeant First Class Kenneth Westbrook, has been shot in the neck. So Will breaks across 50 meters of open space, bullets biting all around. Lying on his back, he presses a bandage to Kenneth's wounds with one hand and calls for a medevac with the other, trying to keep his buddy calm.

By this time, the enemy has gotten even closer, just 20 or 30 meters away, and over the radio, they're demanding the Americans to surrender. So Will stops treating Kenneth long enough to respond by lobbing a grenade.

And finally, after more than an hour and a half of fighting, air support arrives. Will directs them to nearby targets. Then, it's time to move, so exposing himself again to enemy fire, Will helps carry Kenneth the length of more than two football fields, down steep terraces, to that helicopter. And then, in the moment captured by those cameras, Will leans in to say goodbye.

But more Americans and more Afghans are still out there. So Will does something incredible. He jumps behind the wheel of an unarmored Ford Ranger pickup truck. A marine gets in the passenger seat. And they drive that truck—this is a vehicle designed for the highway—straight into the battle.

Twice they pick up injured Afghan soldiers, bullets whizzing past them, slamming into the pickup truck. Twice they bring them back. When the truck gives out, they grab a Humvee. The marine by Will's side has no idea how they survived. But, he says: "By that time it didn't matter. We weren't going to leave any soldiers behind."

Finally, a helicopter spots those four missing Americans, hours after they were trapped in the open ambush. So Will gets in another Humvee, with a crew that includes Dakota Meyer. And together, they drive. Past enemy fighters, up through the valley, exposed once more. And when they reach the village, Will jumps out, drawing even more fire, dodging even more bullets. But they reach those Americans, lying where they fell. Will and the others carry them out, one by one. They bring their fallen brothers home.

Scripture tells us, "The greatest among you shall be your servant." Captain Will Swenson was a leader on that September morning. But like all great leaders, he was also a servant: to the men he commanded, to the more than a dozen Afghans and Americans whose lives he saved, to the families of those who gave their last full measure of devotion on that faraway field. As one of his fellow soldiers later said, "Will did things that nobody else would ever do, and he did it for his guys and for everybody on the ground, to get them out."

And that's why, after I called Will to tell him he'd be receiving this medal, one of the first things he did was to invite to this ceremony those who fought alongside him. And I'd like all of those who served with such valor alongside Will, both Army and Marines, who fought for each other, please stand and be recognized. *[Applause]* Thank you.

Will also reached out to the families of the four Americans who gave their lives that day. To them he wrote—and I'm quoting Will now—"We have never met. We have never spoken. But I would like to believe that I know something about each of you through the actions of your loved ones on that day. They were part of a team. And you are now part of that team."

So I would ask the members of this team—the families of First Lieutenant Michael Johnson, Gunnery Sergeant Edwin Johnson, Gunnery Sergeant Aaron Kenefick, and Hospitalman Third Class James Layton, as well as the family of Kenneth Westbrook—to please stand.

Kenneth was the soldier Will delivered to the safety of that helicopter. And after being airlifted out, he made it to Walter Reed. He started rehab and spent time with his wife Charlene, who joins us here today. She still remembers the first time she spoke to Will, when he called from Afghanistan to check in on Kenneth.

Soon after that phone call, however, Kenneth took a turn for the worse. He succumbed to complications from his treatment. But I think it's fair to say that Charlene will always be grateful for the final days she was able to spend with her husband. And even now, a month rarely goes by when Will doesn't call or text, checking in with Charlene and her three boys. "That's the kind of man he is," Charlene says about Will. "You don't have to ask Will for help. He just knows when to be there for you."

So Will Swenson was there for his brothers. He was there for their families. As a nation, we thank God that patriots like him are there for us all.

So, Will, God bless you and all the men that you fought alongside and everything that you've done for us. God bless all our men and women in uniform. And God bless the United States of America.

With that, I'd like my Military Aide to read the citation, please.

[At this point, Lt. Cmdr. Tiffany F. Hill, USN, Navy Aide to the President, read the citation. The President then presented the medal, assisted by Maj. Michael P. Wagner, USA, Army Aide to the President. Following the presentation, Maj. Gen. Donald L. Rutherford, USA, Army Chief of Chaplains, said a prayer.]

Well, let me say once again, not only to Will, but all our men and women in uniform who have served us with such incredible courage and professionalism, that America is grateful for you. To the families of those we've lost, we will never forget.

And, Will, you are a remarkable role model for all of us, and we're very grateful for your service.

We are going to have a reception after this. I hear the food's pretty good around here. *[Laughter]* And so I hope all of you have a chance to stay, and those of you who have a chance to say thank you to Will, personally, obviously, that's very welcome.

I'm going to be exiting with Will and Michelle first. We'll take a couple of pictures. But enjoy yourselves this afternoon.

God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:15 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Julia Buchholz and Carl Swenson, parents, and Kelsey Long, girlfriend, of Capt. Swenson; 1st Lt. Ademola D. Fabayo, USMC, Marine Embedded Training Team operations officer; Sgt. Kevin Duerst, USA, helicopter crew chief, California National Guard; Charlene Westbrook, wife, and Zachary, Joshua, and Joseph, sons of SFC Kenneth Westbrook, who died on October 7, 2009, from wounds sustained in Afghanistan on September 8, 2009. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the reading of the citation and the prayer said by Maj. Gen. Rutherford.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Congressional Medal of Honor :: Swenson, Capt. William D., presentation.

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Names: Buchholz, Julia; Duerst, Kevin; Fabayo, Ademola D.; Long, Kelsey; Meyer, Dakota L.; Obama, Michelle; Swenson, Carl; Swenson, William D.; Westbrook, Charlene; Westbrook, Joseph; Westbrook, Joshua; Westbrook, Zachary.

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