

Administration of Barack Obama, 2016

Remarks on Presenting the Medal of Honor to Senior Chief Special Warfare Operator (SEAL) Edward C. Byers, Jr.

February 29, 2016

Please be seated. Well, good morning, everyone, and welcome to the White House. The ethos—the creed—that guides every Navy SEAL says this: "I do not advertise the nature of my work, nor seek recognition for my actions." Which is another way of saying that standing here today, in front of the entire Nation, is not Senior Chief Ed Byers's idea of a good time. *[Laughter]* Like so many of our special operators, Ed is defined by a deep sense of humility. He doesn't seek the spotlight. In fact, he shuns it. He's the consummate quiet professional. I imagine there are a lot of other places he'd rather be than in front of all these cameras. Back in Coronado for another hell week—*[laughter]*—holding his breath under dark, frigid water, Spending months being cold, wet and sandy, I'm sure there are other things he'd rather be doing.

But the Medal of Honor is our Nation's highest military decoration. And today's ceremony is truly unique: a rare opportunity for the American people to get a glimpse of a special breed of warrior that so often serves in the shadows. We're a nation of more than 300 million Americans. Of these, less than 1 percent wear the uniform of our Armed Forces. Of these, just a small fraction serve in our special operations forces. Among those who train to become a SEAL, only a select few emerge and earn the right to wear that golden trident.

And consider this: In the entire history of the Navy SEALs, just five have been awarded the Medal of Honor. Their names have become legend: Norris, Kerrey, Thornton, Murphy, Monsoor, and now, a sixth, Byers. Among the members of the Medal of Honor Society who are with us, we are especially honored by the presence of Tommy Norris and Mike Thornton.

Now, given the nature of Ed's service, there is a lot that we cannot say today. Many of the operational details of his mission remain classified. Many of his teammates cannot be mentioned. And this is as it should be. Their success demands secrecy, and that secrecy saves lives.

There are, however, many distinguished guests that we can acknowledge, including Members of Congress, leaders from across our military, including the Navy. In fact, this may be the largest gathering of special ops in the history of the White House. *[Laughter]* Among them, we have from Special Operations Command General Joe Votel and Vice Admiral Sean Pybus; from Joint Special Operations Command Rear Admiral Tim Szymanski; and from Naval Special Warfare Command Rear Admiral Brian Losey and Force Master Chief Derrick Walters. For America's special operators, this is a little bit of a family reunion, and it's wonderful to have them all here.

Most of all, we welcome Ed's wonderful family: his wife Madison, who like so many military spouses has kept their family strong back home while Ed has been deployed; their spectacular daughter Hannah, who is a competitive figure skater and looks the part. *[Laughter]* Ed likes to jump out of planes with a parachute, and when he's not skydiving, he's driving his 1976 Shovelhead Harley. *[Laughter]* When he's not out riding, he's staying in shape with Hannah, who is apparently his workout partner. *[Laughter]* It's good when your trainer is a Navy SEAL. *[Laughter]*

We also welcome mom's—Ed's mom Peggy, who I understand had one question when Ed told her about this ceremony—"Do you think I can come?" *[Laughter]* That's so sweet. Yes, Mom, you're allowed to come when your son gets the Medal of Honor. *[Laughter]* Ed's brothers and sisters are here, as are about 50 cousins from all across the country. And dozens of friends—

many who served alongside Ed—some who have traveled from around the world to be here today. That's the brotherhood—the depth of loyalty to service and to mission—that binds these teams.

Now, looking back, it seems Ed Byers was destined to serve. His father served in the Navy during World War II and now rests in Arlington. As a boy growing up in Grand Rapids, Ohio, Ed would be in the woods, in camouflage, in his words, "playing military," and I suspect the other kids did not stand a chance. [Laughter] A Boy Scout who loved adventure, Ed saw a movie about the Navy SEALs and fell in love with the idea of deploying by sea, air, and land.

"I believe that man will not merely endure. He will prevail," William Faulkner once said, "because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance." Even if he had never performed the actions for which he is being recognized here today, Ed Byers would be long remembered for his compassion, his sacrifice and his endurance: 11 overseas deployments; 9 combat tours; recipient of the Purple Heart twice, the Bronze Star with valor five times.

About three years ago, our Nation called on that spirit once again. In Afghanistan, an American doctor—a husband and father of four children who was working to bring health care to the Afghan people—was driving down a rural road. Gunmen surrounded his car and took him hostage. They tied his hands and marched him into the mountains. The days went by. In a remote valley, in a small single-room building, surrounded by Taliban, he lost all hope. "I was certain," he thought, "I was about to die." His captors told him, the Americans are not coming for you. Well, they were wrong. Whenever Americans are taken hostage in the world, we move heaven and earth to bring them home safe. We send some thunder and some lightning—our special operator forces, folks like Ed Byers. They're carefully selected for their character, their integrity and their judgment. They are highly trained, with skills honed by years of experience. And they willingly volunteer for missions of extraordinary risk like this one.

In this case, there was reason to believe that a Taliban commander was on his way to take custody of the American hostage and move him into Pakistan. So time was of the essence. From a remote forward operating base, Ed and his joint team geared up, boarded their helos, and launched. Once on the ground, they moved—under the cover of darkness, on that cold December night—through the mountains, down rocky trails, for hours. They found their target and moved in quickly and quietly. Then, when they were less than 100 feet from the building, a guard came out, and the bullets started flying.

Our SEALs rushed to the doorway, which was covered by a layer of blankets. Ed started ripping them down, exposing himself to enemy fire. A teammate, the lead assaulter, pushed in and was hit. Fully aware of the danger, Ed moved in next. An enemy guard aimed his rifle right at him. Ed fired. Someone moved across the floor, perhaps the hostage, perhaps another guard lunging for a weapon. The struggle was hand to hand. Ed straddled him, pinning him down. Ed adjusted his night vision goggles. Things came into focus, and he was on top of a guard.

The American hostage later described the scene. The dark room suddenly filled with men and the sound of exploding gunfire. Narrow beams of light shot in every direction. Voices called out his name. He answered, "I'm right here."

Hearing English, Ed leapt across the room and threw himself on the hostage, using his own body to shield him from the bullets. Another enemy fighter appeared, and with his body, Ed kept shielding the hostage. With his bare hands, Ed pinned the fighter to the wall and held him until his teammates took action. It was over almost as soon as it began. In just minutes, by going after those guards, Ed saved the lives of several teammates and that hostage. You're safe, the SEALs told the doctor, you are with American forces. And that hostage came home to be reunited with his wife and his children.

Now, success came with a price. That first SEAL through the door, Ed's friend Nick, was grievously wounded. Ed is a medic, so on the helo out, he stayed with Nick, helping to perform CPR the entire flight—40 minutes long. Today we salute Chief Petty Officer Nicolas Checque. Back in Monroeville, Pennsylvania, they remembered him as the driven kid: the football player and wrestler who always wanted to be a SEAL. For his valor on this mission, he was awarded the Navy Cross, and he's among the 70 members of the Naval Special Warfare community—55 of them SEALs—who have made the ultimate sacrifice since 9/11. The enduring love of Nick's family and all those who admired him remind us of the immense sacrifices that our remarkable Gold Star families have made and our obligation to stand with them always.

So today we don't simply honor a single individual. We also pay tribute to a community across our entire military: special operators, aviators, engineers, technicians, analysts, countless enablers, and their devoted families. In these hard years since 9/11, our Nation has called on this community like never before. Small in number, they have borne an extraordinarily heavy load. But they continue to volunteer, mission after mission, year after year. Few Americans ever see it. I am truly privileged and humbled that, as Commander in Chief, I do get to see it.

I've given the order sending you into harm's way. I see the difference you make every day: the partners you train, the relationships you forge, the other hostages that you've brought home, the terrorists that you take out. I've waited, like many of you, in those minutes that seem like hours when the margin between success and failure is razor thin, for word that the team is out safe. I've grieved with you and I've stood with you at Dover to welcome our fallen heroes on their final journey home.

Our special operations forces are a strategic national asset. They teach us that humans are more important than hardware. Today is a reminder that our Nation has to keep investing in this irreplaceable asset, which means deploying our special operators wisely, preserving force and family, making sure these incredible Americans stay strong in body, in mind, and in spirit.

So I'll end where I started, with the SEAL ethos: "In times of war or uncertainty, there is a special breed of warrior ready to answer our Nation's call. A common man with uncommon desire to succeed. Forged by adversity, he stands alongside America's finest special operations forces to serve his country, the American people, and protect their way of life." Senior Chief Edward Byers, Jr., is such a man. Chief Petty Officer Nicolas Checque was that man. Every Navy SEAL and special operator who serves with honor in his chosen profession is that man.

The American people may not always see them. We may not always hear of their success. But they are there in the thick of the fight, in the dark of night, achieving their mission. We thank God they're there. We sleep more peacefully in our beds tonight because patriots like these stand ready to answer our Nation's call and protect our way of life, now and forever.

And as we prepare for the reading of the citation, I ask you to join me in expressing America's profound gratitude to Navy SEAL Ed Byers and all our quiet professionals.

[At this point, Maj. Wesley N. Spurlock III, USAF, Air Force Aide to the President, read the citation, and the President presented the medal, assisted by Lt. Cmdr. Richard I. Lawlor, USN, Navy Aide to the President. Following the presentation of the medal, Capt. Michael J. Parisi, USN, Chaplain, Chaplain, U.S. Navy Chaplain Corps, said a prayer.]

Well, that concludes the ceremony, but we actually throw a pretty good party here. *[Laughter]* And I've been told the hors d'oeuvres are pretty good. So we welcome all of you to join us in the reception. Ed and I are going to have to take a few more pictures before he joins you. But we are so grateful to him, we're grateful to his wonderful family. Mom, I'm glad that you could come. *[Laughter]* We are welcome—we are grateful for our other Medal of Honor recipients who are here. And to all the special forces who are here, we are extraordinarily grateful

to you. This is obviously an award for individual heroism, but I'm glad we were able to make the broader point—we are so grateful for your service to our Nation.

Thank you very much, everybody. God bless. God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:18 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to former Sen. J. Robert Kerrey, a Medal of Honor recipient; Gen. Joseph L. Votel, USA, commander, and Vice Adm. Sean A. Pybus, USN, deputy commander, U.S. Special Operations Command; Rear Adm. Timothy Szymanski, USN, assistant commanding general, Joint Special Operations Command; Rear Adm. Brian L. Losey, USN, commander, Naval Special Warfare Command; Dilip Joseph, medical director, Morning Star Development, who was kidnaped in eastern Kabul Province, Afghanistan, on December 5, 2012, his wife Cilicia, and their children Asha, Jaron, Tobiah, and Eshaan. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the reading of the citation.

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