AUTHENTICATED
U.S. GOVERNMENT
INFORMATION
GPO

Remarks on Presenting the Public Safety Officer Medal of Valor

May 16, 2016

Thank you, and good morning. Welcome to the White House. Thank you, Attorney General Lynch, for your words and your leadership. We've got a couple of Members of Congress here: Frederica Wilson and Chris Collins we want to acknowledge. And I also want to recognize Director Comey, members of the Fraternal Order of Police, and all the outstanding law enforcement officials who are here from around the country. I'm proud to stand with you as we celebrate Police Week. And most of all, I'm proud to be with the heroes on the front row and with the families who have supported them and the family of one who made the ultimate sacrifice.

It's been said that perfect valor is doing without witnesses what you would do if the whole world were watching. The public safety officers we recognize today with the Medal of Valor found courage not in search of recognition, they did it instinctively. This is an award that none of them sought. And if they could go back in time, I suspect they'd prefer none of this had happened.

As one of today's honorees said about his actions, "I could have very well gone my whole career and not dealt with this situation and been very happy with that." If they had their way, none of them would have to be here, and so we're grateful that they are, and our entire Nation expresses its profound gratitude. More important, we're so grateful that they were there: some on duty, others off duty, all rising above and beyond the call of duty. All saving the lives of people they didn't know.

That distinction—that these 13 officers of valor saved the lives of strangers—is the first of several qualities that they share. But their bravery—if it had not been for their bravery, we likely would have lost a lot of people: mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, friends and loved ones. Thankfully, they are still with their families today because these officers were where they needed to be most at a critical time: at a gas station during a routine patrol, in the middle of a busy hospital, in a grocery store, on the campus of a community college, near an elementary school where a sheriff's deputy's own children were students and his wife taught. In all of these places, in each of these moments, these officers were true to their oaths.

To a person, each of these honorees acted without regard for their own safety. They stood up to dangerous individuals brandishing assault rifles, handguns, and knives. One officer sustained multiple stab wounds while fighting off an assailant. Another endured first-degree burns to his arms and face while pulling an unconscious driver from a burning car on a freeway.

Each of them will tell you, very humbly, the same thing: They were just doing their jobs. They were doing what they had to do, what they were trained to do, like on any other day. The officer who suffered those terrible burns, he left urgent care and went straight to work. He had to finish his shift. And that sense of duty and purpose is what these Americans embody.

And the truth is, it's because of your courage—sometimes seen, but sometimes unseen—that the rest of us can go about living our lives like it's any other day: going to work, going to school, spending time with our families, getting home safely. We so appreciate our public safety officers around the country, from our rookie cadets to our role model of an Attorney

General. Not everyone will wear the medal that we give today, but every day, so many of our public safety officers wear a badge of honor.

The men and women who run toward danger remind us with your courage and humility what the highest form of citizenship looks like. When you see students and commuters and shoppers at risk, you don't see these civilians as strangers. You see them as part of your own family, your own community. As Scripture teaches us, you love your neighbor as yourself, and you put others' safety before your own. In your proud example of public service, you remind us that loving our country means loving one another.

Today we also want to acknowledge the profound sacrifices made by your families. And I had the chance to meet some of them and they were all clearly so proud of you, but we're very proud of them. We know that you wait up late and you're worried and you're counting down the minutes until your loved one walks through the door, safe, after a long shift. We know it never gets easier, and we thank you for that. And of course, we honor those who didn't come home, including one hero we honor posthumously today: Sergeant Robert Wilson III.

He gave his life when two men opened fire at a video game store where Sergeant Wilson was buying a son a birthday present. To his family who's here—his grandmother Constance, his brother and sister—please know how deeply sorry we are for your loss, how grateful we are for Sergeant Wilson's service.

We also honor the more than 35 who have given their lives in the line of duty so far this year. One of them, an officer in Virginia named Ashley Marie Guindon, was taken from us on her very first shift.

I've seen this sacrifice when I've joined some of you at the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial not far from here. We read the names carved on these walls, and we grieve with the families who carry the fallen in their hearts forever. We've been moved deeply by their anguish, but also by their pride in the lives their loved ones lived. And in those moments, we're reminded of our enduring obligation as citizens that they sacrificed so much for: that we do right by them and their families.

And medals and ceremonies like today are important, but these aren't enough to convey the true depth of our gratitude. Our words will be hollow if they're not matched by deeds. So our Nation has a responsibility to support those who serve and protect us and keep our streets safe. We can show our respect by listening to you and learning from you, giving you the resources that you need to do the jobs. That's the mission of our police Task Force, which brought together local law enforcement, civil rights and faith leaders, and community members to open dialogue and build trust and find concrete solutions that make your jobs safer. Our country needs that right now.

We're going to keep pushing Congress to move forward [in]˚ a bipartisan way to make our criminal justice system fairer and smarter and more cost-effective and enhance public safety and ensure the men and women in this room have the ability to enforce the law and keep their communities safe.

A few minutes ago, I signed into law a package of bills to protect and honor our law enforcement officers, including one that will help State and local departments buy more bulletproof vests.

˚ White House correction.

Emerson once said, "There is always safety in valor." The public safety officers we honor today give those words new meaning, for it's your courage and quick thinking that gave us our safety.

So we want to thank you for your service. And we want to thank your families for your sacrifice. I had a chance before I came out here to meet with the recipients, and I told them that, although this particular moment for which you are being honored is remarkable, we also know that every day you go out there, you've got a tough job. And we could not be prouder of not only moments like the ones we recognize here today, but just the day-to-day grind: you doing your jobs professionally, you doing your jobs with character. We want you to know we could not be prouder of you, and we couldn't be prouder of your families for all the contributions that you make.

So may God bless you and your families. May God bless our fallen heroes. May God bless the United States of America.

And it's now my honor to award these medals as the citations are read.

[*At this point, Lt. Cmdr. Richard I. Lawlor, USN, Navy Aide to the President, read the citations and the President presented the medals, assisted by Cmdr. Jillian C. Malzone, USCG, Coast Guard Aide to the President.*]

Let's give one last big round of applause to the recipients of the Medal of Valor.

Thank you all. Thank you for your dedication. Thanks for your service. You are continuously in our thoughts and prayers, and we are continuously giving thanks for all that you and your families do.

Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:30 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Capt. Raymond Bottenfield, Santa Monica, CA, Police Department; Deputy Joseph L. Tortorella, Niagara County, NY, Sheriff's Office, his wife Erica, and their children Samuel and Lilliana; Officer Mario Gutierrez, Miami-Dade, FL, Police Department; Officer Donald Thompson, Los Angeles, CA, Police Department; Carlton Hipps and Ramone Williams, who were charged in the killing of Sgt. Robert Wilson III at the GameStop in Philadelphia, PA, on March 5, 2015; Constance Wilson, grandmother of the late Sgt. Wilson; and Officer Ashley M. Guindon, Prince William County, VA, Police Department, who was killed in the line of duty in Woodbridge, VA, on February 27. He also referred to S. 125, the Bulletproof Vest Partnership Grant Program Reauthorization Act of 2015, which was approved May 16 and assigned Public Law No. 114–155; and S. 2755, the Fallen Heroes Flag Act of 2016, which was approved May 16 and assigned Public Law No. 114–156. Also participating in the ceremony were Public Safety Officer Medal of Valor recipients Patrolmen Lewis Ciochi, Johnson City, NY, Police Department; Officer Jason Salas, Officer Robert Sparks, and; Maj. David Huff, Midwest City, OK, Police Department; Officer Coral Walker, Omaha, NE, Police Department; Officer Gregory Stevens, Garland, TX, Police Department; Officer Niel Johnson, North Miami, FL, Police Department; and Special Agent Tyler Call, Federal Bureau of Investigation. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the reading of the medal citations.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Public Safety Officer Medal of Valor, presentation.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Bottenfield, Raymond; Collins, Chris; Comey, James B., Jr.; Guindon, Ashley M.; Gutierrez, Mario; Lynch, Loretta E.; Thompson, Donald; Tororella, Lilliana L.; Tortorella, Erica L.; Tortorella, Joseph L.; Tortorella, Samuel L.; Wilson, Constance; Wilson, Frederica S.

Subjects: Decorations, medals, and awards : Public Safety Officer Medal of Valor; Holidays and special observances : Police Week; Justice, Department of : Attorney General; Justice, Department of : Bureau of Investigation, Federal; Law enforcement and crime : 21st-Century Policing, President's Task Force on; Law enforcement and crime : Criminal justice system, reform efforts; Law enforcement and crime : Fraternal Order of Police; Law enforcement and crime : Law enforcement officers, service and dedication; Legislation, enacted : Bulletproof Vest Partnership Grant Program Reauthorization Act of 2015; Legislation, enacted : Fallen Heroes Flag Act of 2016.

DCPD Number: DCPD201600323.