

Administration of Donald J. Trump, 2018

Remarks on Presenting the Medal of Honor to Master Chief Special Warfare Operator (SEAL) Britt K. Slabinski

May 24, 2018

Thank you very much, Chaplain. That's beautiful. And thank you to Deputy Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan. Thank you, Patrick. Under Secretary of the Navy Thomas Modly—thank you. Thank you, Thomas. VA Secretary nominee—will do a fantastic job for us—Robert Wilkie. And Congressmen Scott Taylor and Brian Mast. Thank you, fellas, very much. Thank you.

Members of the Armed Forces and distinguished guests, please sit down—that actually worked out very nicely—[*laughter*]*—*and join me in officially welcoming Master Chief Britt Slabinski to the White House. A special man. A truly brave person. Today we pay tribute to Britt's heroic service, and we proudly present him with our nation's highest military honor—and I would go so far to say our Nation's highest honor.

Joining Britt today is his son Bryce—Bryce, thank you very much—a rising senior at a wonderful school known to the world as Ohio State. Great place. [*Laughter*] That's a great school. Along with Britt's sisters Brenda and Teka and Brenda's husband Tom. Thank you very much for being here. Here as well are Britt's significant other, Christina, and her two children John and Meghan, who we just met in the Oval Office. That's a special place too. Thank you all for joining us for this really special day and special ceremony. Thank you very much.

Finally, we're honored to be joined by several previous congressional Medal of Honor recipients. Would you please stand. Would you please stand. Thank you, fellas. Very, very special people. Your names and your immortal acts of valor are forever engraved in the memory of our Nation. Our Nation will always be grateful to you, and you know that.

Today we induct a new name into the world's most exclusive gathering of heroes. And that's exactly what it is. Britt was raised in Northampton, Massachusetts. He became an Eagle Scout by the age of 14. His father was a veteran, who served as a frogman in the underwater demolitions group of the U.S. Navy. Those are tough people. While Britt was in junior high, his dad brought him to their reunion. Britt was inspired by their bond of friendship, their stories of service, and their boundless love of country.

As soon as he graduated from high school in 1988, Britt enlisted in the Navy to become a SEAL. That means he is a physically very strong person, and that also means he is a mentally very strong person. That's tough. Throughout the grueling months of training, Britt proved himself every single step of the way. In 1990, he graduated the legendary BUDS training course, and he earned that special badge worn only by the bravest few: the SEAL Trident.

In 2002, Britt was called to support Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. In the late evening hours of March 3d that year, he led an elite team on a combat mission to establish a secure position on the peak of a 10,000-foot mountain known as Takur Gahr. Britt and his teammates were preparing to exit the helicopter onto the mountain when their aircraft was struck by a machinegun—and machinegun-fire like they've never seen before, and a rocket-propelled grenade from Al Qaida terrorists down below. Not a good feeling. As the helicopter lurched away from the assault, Petty Officer First Class Neil Roberts was flung out of the aircraft—tremendous, tremendous, horrible thing to witness—and onto the side of the mountain before the helicopter crashed into the valley below.

After surviving, barely, the violent crash, Britt and his team were retrieved by a second helicopter; also, by the way, piloted by very brave people. At this point, Britt received information suggesting their comrade, Neil Roberts, the man thrown out of the helicopter, was probably still alive. The team faced a choice: to wait for reinforcements and, pretty much safety or to return immediately to the enemy stronghold in the hope of saving Neil's life.

They would be outmanned, outgunned, and fighting uphill on a steep, icy mountain. And every soldier knows you don't want to fight uphill. They learned that at Gettysburg: You don't fight uphill. But they would face freezing temperatures and bitter winds at the highest altitude of battle in the history of the American military. This was the highest point where we ever fought. The odds were not good. They were not in their favor.

But Britt and his team didn't even hesitate for a moment. They made their decision. For them it was an easy one. They went back to that mountain. When their helicopter reached the mountain peak, they jumped out into a furious onslaught of machinegun-fire like none of them had ever seen before.

Britt and his teammate Sergeant John Chapman charged uphill toward the enemy, where John was shot after clearing a bunker. Britt continued to engage the enemy, repeatedly exposing himself to horrendous fire. Two of his other teammates, Stephen "Turbo" Toboz and Brett Morganti, both suffered very, very serious leg injuries. Britt helped them to safety and called in airstrikes as continuous fire drove them ever-further down the face of the mountain—got worse and worse, more and more dangerous. He kept going.

In a treacherous descent, Britt and his men carried Turbo through the snow. At one point, they fashioned a makeshift harness out of their gun straps to hoist Turbo down a 13-foot cliff, in itself treacherous, because if you miss that little area, they go down the mountain. And no stopping them. When they could go no further, Britt tended to the wounded and coordinated their escape until his team was finally evacuated from enemy territory.

Seven of the brave men who fought with Britt are here with us today, and maybe they'll stand up as I call their name. Petty Officer Second Class Brett Morganti. Pretty dangerous place, huh? Way to go, Brett. Chief Warrant Officer Kyle Soderberg. Thank you, Kyle. Petty Officer Second Class Stephen Toboz. Thanks, Stephen. Chief Warrant Officer Al Mack. Thank you. Sergeant Christopher Cunningham. Master Sergeant Eric Stebner. A Master Chief Petty Officer still on Active Duty is quietly not with us today. I just want to thank you all. Unbelievable acts of bravery. Thank you very much. Thank you, folks. Thank you very much. Incredible.

Today we also remember the brave soldiers who gave their lives on that mountain: Technical Sergeant John Chapman, Corporal Matthew Commons, Specialist Marc Anderson, Sergeant Bradley Crose, Senior Airman Jason Cunningham, Technical Sergeant Philip Svitak, and of course, Petty Officer First Class Neil Roberts—who met a horrible death—for whom these events are now known—it's called the Battle of Roberts Ridge. Incredible event.

To the Gold Star family members of those heroes who are here today, please stand up. Please, stand up. Please. It's an honor to have you accept our Nation's profound sorrow and a deep love and everlasting gratitude. These were incredible, incredible men, and you can be proud that they were in your family. And they are looking down right now, and they are very, very proud of you. Thank you very much. Thank you for being here. Thank you.

To Britt, and to all of the men of Roberts Ridge: You waged a fierce fight against the enemies. And these really have become the enemies of America and the enemies of all civilization. Through your actions, you demonstrated that there is no love more pure and no courage more great than the love and courage that burns in the hearts of American patriots. We

are free because warriors like you are willing to give their sweat, their blood, and, if they have to, their lives for our great Nation.

Britt, you went on to serve many more years in the U.S. Navy before finally retiring in 2014. Today, he continues his life of serving by volunteering with the Navy SEAL Foundation, and on behalf of Gold Star families. Special, special, incredible families. And as one of his fellow servicemembers testifies, he is an amazing father to Bryce, who, like his dad, is now an Eagle Scout.

Britt wants the country to know that for him, the recognition he is about to receive is an honor that falls on the whole team—he wants you folks to know that—on the whole team, on every American warrior who fought the forces of terror on that snowy Afghan ridge. Each of them has entered the eternal chronicle of American valor and American bravery.

Britt, we salute you; we thank you. We thank God for making you a United States SEAL. We love our Navy SEALs. They've very special, very incredible people. It's now my tremendous privilege to present to you the congressional Medal of Honor.

And I'd like the Military Aide to come forward and please read the citation. Thank you.

[At this point, Lt. Col. Ricardo A. Turner, USA, Army Aide to the President, read the citation, and the President presented the medal, assisted by Cmdr. Jeffrey C. Fassenbender, USN, Navy Aide to the President. Following the presentation of the medal, Capt. Gregory C. Cathcart, USN, Navy Chaplain Corps, said a prayer.]

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:38 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Brenda and Tom Fuller, sister and brother-in-law, and Teka Bartter, sister, of MCPO Slabinski, USN (Ret.). The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the reading of the citation.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Medal of Honor :: SOCM Britt K. Slabinski, presentation.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Barrter, Teka; Cathcart, Gregory C.; Cunningham, Christopher; Fuller, Brenda; Fuller, Tom; Mack, Al; Mast, Brian J.; Modly, Thomas B.; Morganti, Brett; Shanahan, Patrick M.; Slabinski, Britt K.; Slabinski, Bryce; Soderberg, Kyle; Stebner, Eric; Taylor, Scott W.; Toboz, Stephen; Turner, Ricardo A.; Wilkie, Robert L., Jr.

Subjects: Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Casualties; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Service and dedication; Decorations, medals, and awards : Medal of Honor; Defense, Department of : Deputy Secretary; Navy, Department of the : Under Secretary; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Secretary-designate.

DCPD Number: DCPD201800370.