

Top News

Marine to get medal of honor for blocking grenade

Lolita C. Baldor

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This photo taken May 13, 2014 shows Medically retired Marine Lance Cpl. Kyle Carpenter speaking to media at the Pentagon. The White House announced Monday that Carpenter, 24, will receive the medal of honor on June 19. He is the 15th recipient of the medal for service in Iraq and Afghanistan, the eighth still alive. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

WASHINGTON >> Cpl. Kyle Carpenter remembers lying on his back on a rooftop in Marjah, Afghanistan, crammed up against sandbags alongside his friend and fellow Marine, Lance Cpl. Nicholas Eufrazio.

It was Nov. 21, 2010, and his squad was trying push south into Taliban strongholds, working to set up patrol bases and establish a stronger U.S. Marine presence in the

volatile region.

He doesn't recall the attack. He doesn't remember throwing himself in front of Lance Cpl. Nicholas Eufrazio to protect him from a grenade, an act that earned him the Medal of Honor, the military's highest award.

But the few seconds between the blast and unconsciousness are clear.

The impact felt like his face and body had been hit with a two-by-four, he said, his vision was blurry and there was a loud ringing in his ears. The blood felt like warm water flowing over his face, and as he ran his tongue around his mouth, he couldn't feel his jaw.

"I remember my buddies yelling at me, it sounded like they were a football field away. I remember them yelling, you know, you're gonna make it, you're gonna make it. And I just kept trying to tell them that I was gonna die," Carpenter said in an interview with a small group of reporters at the Pentagon.

As he drifted off, he said he remembers realizing how devastated his family would be that he wasn't getting out of Afghanistan alive. And then, he said, "I asked for forgiveness ... I wanted to go to heaven."

The White House announced Monday that Carpenter, 24, will receive the medal of honor on June 19. He is the 15th recipient of the medal for service in Iraq and Afghanistan, the eighth still alive.

He accepts the honor with a heavy dose of humility and Southern charm befitting a native of Flowood, Mississippi.

Asked to recount the incident, he's frustrated that he doesn't recall the details or what he was thinking as the grenade landed.

He and Eufrazio were ready for a fight. Carpenter's squad was trying to secure Patrol Base Dakota, and two Marines had been wounded in an enemy attack the day before. At about 10 a.m., insurgents threw three grenades. The third landed on the rooftop and, according to a Marine Corps report, Carpenter moved to shield Eufrazio.

Eufrazio received a shrapnel injury to his head, but Carpenter's body absorbed most of the blast.

Asked about his injuries, Carpenter glances skeptically at a notebook and smiles. "You're gonna need more room on that paper."

The list is long: He lost his right eye and injured his left, both eardrums were blown, most of his teeth were blown out and much of his jaw was missing. His right arm was shattered, his left arm, wrist and hand had multiple breaks, his right lung collapsed and he had shrapnel wounds in his legs.

Six weeks after the blast, he woke up in Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. Over the next two-and-a-half years doctors rebuilt his teeth and face, and saved his arm. Surrounded by family and friends, and deluged with letters from all over the country, he said he viewed the recovery not as a struggle, but a goal.

The hardest part?

"Going from toting a machine gun in Afghanistan ... to using a bed pan and I can't even put my own socks on," he said. "It took eight months or so to be able to put my socks on, on my own, but it was a long eight months. But I guess that was the hardest part. Letting other people help me."

Now a student at the University of South Carolina, Carpenter says his time at Walter Reed gave him a new perspective on life. As he started to recuperate he took hospital-sponsored trips to ski and snowboard, he went skydiving, and last year he completed the Marine Corp Marathon. And he wants people to treat all veterans as heroes, the way he is being treated.

As for the White House ceremony in June, he's says he's proud of what he did. But, he quips about the grenade, "to be honest, I don't know why I didn't get that thing and punt it right back to them."

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AP Broadcast reporter Sagar Meghani contributed to this report.

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