

REMARKS

OF

MARY LOU LEARY
ACTING ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL
OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS

AT THE

MEDAL OF VALOR AWARDS CEREMONY

ON

WENDESDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2013
WASHINGTON, DC

Good afternoon. I'm Mary Lou Leary, Acting Assistant Attorney General for the Justice Department's Office of Justice Programs.

It's an honor for me to join Vice President Biden and Attorney General Holder in welcoming all of you. I'd also like to acknowledge and thank my colleague, Denise O'Donnell – Director of our Bureau of Justice Assistance – who is in the audience. The Bureau of Justice Assistance administers the Medal of Valor program.

I'd also like to welcome Congressman Cartwright, Director Mueller, Director Samuels, Acting Director Jones, and our other special guests. Thank you so much for joining us. And finally, thank you to the Medal of Valor Review Board Members who are here with us today.

We're here to recognize 18 extraordinary individuals for their quick thinking, selflessness, and exceptional courage. They are law enforcement and corrections officers and firefighters who went beyond the call of duty to risk – and in some cases, to give – their lives for their fellow citizens and colleagues. As a reflection of the sacrifices they are called upon to make, four of our recipients are being honored posthumously – Sergeant Thomas Baitinger, Deputy Cameron Justus, Trooper Joshua Miller, and Deputy William Stiltner. Today, we pay tribute to their memory.

I'm now privileged to introduce our next speaker and the nation's top law enforcement officer.

As a career prosecutor, Eric Holder has worked closely with public safety officers at the local and federal levels. He understands the challenges they face and works hard to make sure they have the resources they need to do their jobs safely and effectively. He is a true friend of the law enforcement community, and I'm pleased and honored that he could be here today.

Please welcome the Attorney General of the United States.

* * * * *

Thank you, Vice President Biden, and we are truly grateful for your leadership and for your continued strong support of our nation's public safety officers.

It's now my honor to confer the medals. I'll read the first citation, then ask that the recipient come forward to receive a medal and certificate, then do the same for the remaining recipients. In the case of our fallen honorees, I'll ask that their family members or agency representatives accepting on their behalf come forward. We'll first confer the 2009-2010 medals, then the 2010-2011 medals.

The first recipient of the 2009-2010 Medal of Valor is Officer Julie Olson of the Maplewood, Minnesota Police Department.

On September 7, 2009, Officer Olson was called to assist North St. Paul Officer Richard Crittenden, who was responding to a call from a woman whose estranged husband had come to her apartment. The woman had an Order of Protection against the suspect, and the North St. Paul Police Department had dealt with him several times in the past.

Officer Olson and Officer Crittenden arrived on the scene at the same time. As they entered the woman's apartment, Officer Crittenden was attacked by the man wielding a flaming cloth. Officer Crittenden pushed the residents out of harm's way and was struck in the face and side of the head. During the ensuing struggle, the suspect grabbed Officer Crittenden's sidearm from his holster and fired one round at point-blank range at his head, killing him. The suspect then fired on Officer Olson, shattering her spare magazine and injuring her arm. She returned fire, striking him several times before backing out of the apartment, reloading, and re-entering with another officer. They disarmed and handcuffed the suspect, who subsequently died at the scene.

Officer Olson kept her composure while under tremendous duress, bringing an end to a terrible situation. Congratulations, Officer Olson.

The next recipient is Officer Reeshamah Taylor of the Osceola County, Florida Corrections Department.

On June 22, 2009, Officer Taylor was assigned to the Medical Unit of the Osceola County Jail when she was confronted by a high-risk inmate who had taken an officer hostage. The inmate was a gang member who had a history of violent felony charges and was serving three consecutive life sentences with no possibility of parole. He placed a fully loaded 9 millimeter semi-automatic handgun to Officer Taylor's head, and a struggle ensued.

Although the inmate was far larger, Officer Taylor knocked him to the floor, dislodged the gun, pinned him to the ground, and – with one arm around him in a headlock – radioed for assistance with her other hand. Her quick-thinking and skill, in the face of imminent danger, saved not only her own life, but potentially, the lives of others. Congratulations, Officer Taylor.

The next recipient is Wildlife Officer Michael Neal of the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission.

On May 20, 2010, Officer Neal answered a call for assistance after two West Memphis Police officers were shot and killed during a traffic stop. The shooting suspects were in a van in a parking lot and were using both an AK-47 assault rifle and a handgun to fire on Sheriff Dick Busby and Chief Deputy W. A. Wren.

When he arrived, Officer Neal used his truck to ram the suspects' van, preventing their escape and diverting the suspects' attention away from the Sheriff and the Deputy. The suspects opened fire on Officer Neal's truck, firing several rounds through the

windshield. Officer Neal avoided being hit and returned fire. He disabled the driver and possibly the passenger before putting his truck in reverse and backing out of the line of fire so other officers could continue the firefight. Both suspects were pronounced dead at the scene. By putting himself in harm's way, Officer Neal's actions undoubtedly saved the lives of Sheriff Busby and Deputy Wren, both who were injured. Congratulations, Officer Neal.

Our next recipients are Officer Sean Haller and Officer Rafael Rivera of the California Highway Patrol.

On February 25, 2010, officers from the Fresno County Sheriff's Office attempted to serve a search warrant at a residence in the town of Minkler. As they approached the door, they came under intense gunfire, fatally wounding one of the deputies. After hearing the "shots fired" call over the radio, Officer Haller responded to the call and subsequently exchanged gunfire with the suspect. Fellow California Highway Patrol Officer Rivera arrived and took cover behind Officer Haller's patrol vehicle.

Both officers engaged in gunfire until a "cease-fire" command was given. During a second exchange, another officer was hit. Officer Rivera moved to rescue the fallen officer while still under fire. Meanwhile, Officer Haller broke cover and moved into position to engage the suspect, providing cover for Officer Rivera. Officer Rivera was able to move the injured officer to a protected position, although – sadly – he did not survive his injuries. The assailant committed suicide before the officers entered the residence.

Both Officer Haller and Officer Rivera placed themselves in immense danger to save a fellow officer. We are grateful for your actions. Congratulations.

The next recipients are Trooper Robert Lombardo and fallen Trooper Joshua Miller of the Pennsylvania State Police.

On June 7, 2009, Troopers Miller and Lombardo joined in the pursuit of a man who threatened his wife with a gun and then abducted his nine-year-old son. After a 40-mile chase, Trooper Miller employed a maneuver to bring the rogue vehicle to a stop. Recognizing that the child was in imminent danger, he and Trooper Lombardo approached the driver's side of the Honda, using their batons to shatter the window.

The subject then fired three shots from a 9 millimeter handgun, striking Trooper Lombardo once in the left shoulder and Trooper Miller in the right thigh and neck. Despite Trooper Lombardo's injuries, which paralyzed his left arm, he did not seek cover and continued to engage the assailant, who died at the scene. The suspect's son was rescued uninjured. Trooper Miller was flown to Lehigh Valley Hospital in Allentown, where – sadly – he was pronounced dead. Trooper Lombardo was treated for his wounds and has since returned to duty.

We congratulate both Trooper Miller and Trooper Lombardo, and we pay a debt of honor to Trooper Miller for making the ultimate sacrifice.

Now, for the 2010-2011 honorees. The first recipient is Firefighter Peter Demontreux of the New York City Fire Department.

On August 30, 2010, Firefighter Demontreux and his unit responded to a fire in a four-story brownstone. When they arrived, they found the front door and stairway blocked by flames. Instead of waiting for a hoseline, Firefighter Demontreux climbed an aerial ladder to a third floor window, where he found a man who told him his friend was trapped inside.

He went in and found the man deep inside the building. As he helped him through the apartment, the entire third floor suddenly exploded and set them both ablaze. Although himself engulfed in flames, Firefighter Demontreux stuck by the victim and guided him onto the ladder – and to safety. Though both men were badly burned – tests later showed they were subjected to temperatures of over 1,000 degrees – they both survived, thanks to Firefighter Demontreux’s quick-thinking, skill, and courage. Congratulations, Firefighter Demontreux.

The next recipients are Firefighter Hope Scott and Battalion Chief William Reynolds of the Virginia Beach, Virginia Fire Department.

On October 12, 2010, Firefighter Scott, then-Captain Reynolds, and their engine company responded to a house fire in Virginia Beach. When they arrived, two family members were on the porch roof trying to find a way to reach a baby and a 73-year-old woman – the baby’s great-grandmother – trapped inside. The heavy smoke and high heat kept the potential rescuers from entering.

Knowing time was of the essence, Captain Reynolds and Firefighter Scott entered a second floor window without a fire hose, an extremely high-risk maneuver. The heat was so intense, it rendered a thermal imaging camera ineffective, and they were forced to crawl blindly through the debris. Firefighter Scott heard a faint cry and followed the sound, sweeping the floor with her arms. She found the baby and handed it to Captain Reynolds, who brought the baby to safety. The baby made a full recovery and suffered no major medical effects. Sadly, the baby’s great-grandmother died later of injuries.

By undergoing one of the riskiest maneuvers in firefighting, Captain Reynolds and Firefighter Scott demonstrated exceptional bravery and self-sacrifice. Congratulations.

Our next honoree is Deputy Sheriff Krista McDonald of the Kitsap County, Washington Sheriff’s Office.

On January 23, 2011, Deputy McDonald responded as back-up with two of her colleagues to a report of an armed man with a missing 13-year-old girl. They found the

suspect with the girl outside a store and asked him to identify himself. He refused and tried to run. Deputy McDonald's colleagues gave chase, and both were shot.

Deputy McDonald moved toward her downed colleagues, even though they were still being fired upon. As the suspect continued firing, she advanced on him without benefit of cover, returned fire, and struck him in the leg. The girl, witnessing the injury, ran to the suspect's side. The suspect shot and mortally wounded the young girl before turning the gun on himself.

In protecting her fellow officers, Deputy McDonald exhibited extraordinary courage under fire. Congratulations.

Our next recipients are Officer Timothy McClintick, Officer Max McDonald, Officer Douglas Weaver, Sergeant Karl Lounge, Jr., and fallen Sergeant Thomas Baitinger, of the Saint Petersburg, Florida Police Department.

On January 24, 2011, a Federal Fugitive Task Force tracked a violent suspect to his house. Two members of the task force found the suspect in the attic, and as they attempted to make an arrest, he pulled his gun and shot them both. One of the officers fell through the attic to the floor below. The suspect moved the other fatally wounded officer to the attic opening in an effort to lure officers into the kill zone.

Officer McClintick, already on the scene, crawled to the downed officer on the floor and, under fire from above, pulled him back and administered aid. Meanwhile, a Rapid Response Team composed of Sergeant Baitinger, Sergeant Lounge, and Officers McDonald and Weaver, entered the house to rescue the besieged officers. Sergeant Baitinger, a rapid response instructor, led the entry with a ballistic shield. With Sergeant Lounge providing cover, Sergeant Baitinger moved under the attic. The suspect let loose a barrage of gunfire, finally landing a fatal shot on Sergeant Baitinger. All the officers engaged in the rescue attempt came under continuous fire. The incident ended when the fugitive was shot and killed.

Under very challenging and dangerous circumstances – confronting an assailant who had the advantage of cover – these five brave men risked their lives to rescue their fellow officers and bring a fugitive to justice. In so doing, Sergeant Baitinger made the ultimate sacrifice.

The final recipients of the 2010-2011 Medal of Valor are fallen Deputy Cameron Justus and fallen Deputy William Stiltner of the Buchanan County, Virginia County Sheriff's Office.

On March 13, 2011, Deputy Stiltner was at home when he heard two fellow officers were shot while responding to a larceny call at a local salvage yard. He headed to the scene to find a sniper shooting from the woods above. Under fire, he and a second deputy tried to move the wounded officers to safety. While attempting the rescue, Deputy Stiltner was shot and fatally wounded.

Deputy Justus, also off duty, arrived to find the officers trapped by the gunman on the ground below. Armed with his M-16 rifle, he spotted the sniper in the trees. As Deputy Justus pulled the trigger, the sniper fired, inflicting a mortal wound on Deputy Justus. The sniper was finally shot and killed by other deputies.

Deputy Stiltner and Deputy Justus gave their lives for their fellow officers and for their community. Our nation is grateful for their service.

Thank you, and, again, congratulations to all our recipients. I know I speak for the Vice President and the Attorney General when I tell you what an honor it has been to confer these medals.

Thank you again.

###