

To Get That Medal, Marines Generally Have To die

Jerry Jonas

COMMENTARY

For the past five years, Dan Fraley, (Bucks County's Director of Military and Veterans Affairs) and I have been trying to correct what we consider a grievous injustice done to a local Vietnam veteran. After years of painstaking research, including tracking down and obtaining statements from eye-witnesses throughout the country, we're convinced that Newtown resident Richard Gresko was deprived of an honor he should have received more than 38 years ago.

On March 11, 1970, while serving as a U.S. Marine in Vietnam, 19-year old Gresko threw his body onto an enemy hand grenade to save the lives of four fellow-Marines. While Gresko absorbed the full impact of the explosion and was horribly wounded, he miraculously survived. The next day his commanding officer recommended him for the Medal of Honor; yet for more than six years, Gresko would receive no official recognition for his bravery. Then, in 1976, and only after the persistent intercession of a U.S. Senator, Gresko would be denied the Medal of Honor. Instead, he would be awarded the Navy Cross, the second highest award a Marine can receive for bravery.

Today, more than 38 years later, after submission of volumes of new and relevant information (including eyewitness accounts) and after repeated appeals by several local congressmen (James Greenwood, Michael Fitzpatrick, and Patrick Murphy) the Commandant of the Marine Corps and the Secretary of the Navy continue to deny Gresko his proper award.

As a result of our investigation, and after numerous meetings with key members of Congress (including heads of committees), U.S. Marine Corps brass, and representatives from the Department of Defense (both locally and in Washington, D.C.), both Fraley and I have come to a simple conclusion. Simply put, the chief impediment to Gresko having received the proper Medal was that he survived the grenade explosion. Had he died following his supreme act of bravery, there is overwhelming statistical evidence that he would long ago have received the Medal of Honor.

The Medal of Honor (often mistakenly referred to as the Congressional Medal of Honor) is the highest military decoration the U.S. government can bestow on individual members of its armed forces. It is awarded for valor and bravery in action above and beyond the call of duty. An extreme example of such valor and bravery is that of an individual throwing his body onto an enemy hand grenade in an attempt to save the lives of his comrades. While there is nothing in the criteria that says one has to die, the evidence is overwhelming that dying is a major factor in deciding who gets the medal. At least in the Marine Corps.

Asked to testify before the House Armed Services Committee in December, 2007, on the lack of uniformity on how major medals are awarded, I provided a wealth of statistics to prove this point. Representatives from the Marine Corps and the Department of Defense vigorously denied my allegations, but recent official documentation obtained directly from the Marine Corps' Pentagon offices bears out my argument.

These documents reveal that during World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, a combined total of 189 Marines threw their bodies onto hand grenades in attempts to save their comrades. Of those Marines who died, 71% received the Medal of Honor. Of those Marines who survived, only 5% received the Medal of Honor.

The extreme was in Vietnam where only one of the 56 Marines (2%) who jumped on a grenade and survived was awarded the Medal. Ironically, that individual, Gunnery Sgt. Allan Jay Kellogg, Jr., was in the same unit as Gresko, and his actions occurred on the same night as did Gresko's.

This practice of properly awarding only those who die, apparently continues in the Marine Corps (and even the Navy) today. Two of the four Medals of Honor awarded (or scheduled to be awarded) for bravery in Iraq or Afghanistan have been for jumping on grenades. In each case, the recipient had lost his life as a result of his actions.

On April 14, 2004, while on a combat reconnaissance mission in Karabilah, Iraq, Marine Cpl. Jason Dunham threw himself on an enemy grenade, in an attempt to use his helmet to shield himself and others from the explosion. Severely injured, he died 8 days later at the National Naval Medical Center at Bethesda. On January 11, 2007, in a White House ceremony, President Bush posthumously presented Cpl. Dunham's family with the Medal of Honor.

On September 29, 2006 while participating in combat operations in Ramadi, Iraq, Special Operations Petty Officer 2nd Class Michael A. Monsoor, a member of a 4-man SEAL sniper team, died after throwing himself on top of a grenade to shield his comrades. His family will receive the Medal of Honor from the president in a White House ceremony scheduled for April 8, 2008.

In a letter to Secretary of the Navy Donald C. Winter, Congressman Patrick Murphy (who continues to work diligently on Gresko's behalf), praised Montoor's bravery and his posthumous receipt of the Medal of Honor, but took issue with the Secretary's recent decision to turn down an appeal for Gresko's Medal. "...the only difference I can see in the two cases," Murphy wrote, "is that unfortunately S02 Montoor was killed while performing his action, while Sgt. Gresko miraculously survived. Throwing one's body on a live grenade to save one's comrades is the most gallant act one can perform in combat. That fact does not change regardless of ... whether the serviceman dies in action."

Neither Fraley, Murphy, nor I have given up on eventually seeing Gresko receive his proper award, and several Marine Corps Generals have told me privately that they felt Gresko should have gotten (or should still get) his Medal. God willing, we'll all be around to see it happen.

As a Marine who spent a year in Korea's front lines, I'm extremely proud to have served in the world's finest branch of the military. Yet, I'd be even prouder to see the Corps treat heroes like Gresko a little more consistently.

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Jerry Jonas' column appears in the Life Section every Sunday.