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# AMERICAN WAY

MAY 2016

## ***THIS IS HER YEAR***

**OLIVIA MUNN'S  
STAR IS ON THE RISE  
AS SHE GETS  
BATTLE-READY FOR  
X-MEN: APOCALYPSE**



# EDITOR'S NOTE

By Adam Pitluk



FROM LEFT: Caleb Downs, Jacquelyne Froeber, Amanda Ogle, Abby Kinsinger, Travis Kinsey, Col. Doc Ballard, Adam Pitluk, Brian Smith, AA Captain James Palmersheim and David Halloran

## The Ballad of Doc Ballard

**F**or a coming-together of such a collection of dignitaries — political, military and civilian — the reception at the White House was rather jovial. Folks like these don't gather very often, and when they do, it's usually behind closed doors where clandestine U.S. Military operations are hashed out and battle plans are devised. But on Feb. 29, 2016, top brass from all of the armed forces, as well as politicians, celebrities and laypeople, congregated at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, where Senior Chief Special Warfare Operator Edward Byers was presented the Congressional Medal of Honor by President Obama for his heroism during a rescue operation in the Qarghah'i District of eastern Afghanistan.

There were three happenings at the ceremony — two overt and one hidden — that were striking. For one, the president remarked that this may well have been the largest gathering of special operators ever assembled at the White House. Byers is a member of the notorious SEAL Team 6, and their successes and accomplishments — and their identities — are usually kept classified.

The second was that Byers, a soft-spoken, humble hero from Tontogany, Ohio, stood there, ramrod straight, as the leader of the free world bestowed the nation's highest honor upon him, and he said nothing. He mouthed a "thank you" to the crowd as they revered him with a standing ovation, but he did not address them or approach the microphone. It was only later that he said to the

gaggle of media that he wasn't a hero at all. He said the real heroes were the men in his unit, particularly Petty Officer 1st Class Nicolas D. Checque, 28, who had been shot and killed during the hostage-rescue operation for which Byers was recognized. Byers said in a post-ceremony interview that his daughter "knows that I'm Daddy, and she loves me just

**"THEY CALL ME A HERO, BUT I LOOK AT THE YOUNGER KIDS TODAY WILLING TO SERVE, AND THEY ARE MY HEROES."**

—COL. DOC BALLARD

for that. If you talk to her one-on-one, she'll tell you all the five nicknames she has for me, and none of them includes 'hero.'"

And the third happening — the one that wasn't caught on camera or noted by reporters — was that when President Obama put the medal around Byers' neck, he was presenting only the second Medal of Honor to a living Navy man from the hospital corps (Byers' initial unit) in over four decades. The last time was in 1970. The president was Richard Nixon. And the recipient was a corpsman second class from the 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines named Donald "Doc" Ballard.

Doc's story is book-worthy. Heck, it's volume-worthy. This is the actual Medal of Honor citation:

*Hospital Corpsman Second Class, United States Navy, Company M, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines, 3rd Marine Division. Place and date: Quang Tri Province, Republic of Vietnam, May 16, 1968. Entered service at: Kansas City, Mo. Born: December 5, 1945, Kansas City, Mo.*

*For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life and beyond the call of duty while serving as a HC2c. with Company M, in connection with operations against enemy aggressor forces. During the afternoon hours, Company M was moving to join the remainder of the 3d Battalion in Quang Tri Province. After treating and evacuating 2 heat casualties, HC2c. Ballard was returning to his platoon from the evacuation landing zone when the company was ambushed by a North Vietnamese Army unit employing automatic weapons and mortars, and sustained numerous casualties. Observing a wounded marine, HC2c. Ballard unhesitatingly moved across the fire-swept terrain to the injured man and swiftly rendered medical assistance to his comrade. HC2c. Ballard then directed 4 marines to carry the casualty to a position of relative safety. As the 4 men prepared to move the wounded marine, an enemy soldier suddenly left his concealed position and, after hurling a hand grenade which landed near the casualty, commenced firing upon the small group of men. Instantly shouting a warning to the marines, HC2c. Ballard fearlessly threw himself upon the lethal explosive device to protect his comrades from the deadly blast. When*

PHOTO RANDALL M. STILLINGER

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

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*the grenade failed to detonate, he calmly arose from his dangerous position and resolutely continued his determined efforts in treating other marine casualties. HC2c. Ballard's heroic actions and selfless concern for the welfare of his companions served to inspire all who observed him and prevented possible injury or death to his fellow marines. His courage, daring initiative, and unwavering devotion to duty in the face of extreme personal danger, sustain and enhance the finest traditions of the U.S. Naval Service.*

Folks, you read that right: The man jumped on an enemy grenade.

The *American Way* staff was honored to receive Doc Ballard in our office recently. He told us his story in-depth (of which, horrifyingly, there is a lot more that wasn't mentioned in the citation). He also shared his opinions on duty, honor, country, what it means to be one of only 78 living Medal of Honor recipients, and the sheer terror of May 16, 1968, in the Quang Tri province of Vietnam, 48 years ago this month.

"That was probably the worst day of my life," he told our staff. The younger staffers, whose generation is more familiar with Iraq and Afghanistan veterans than with Vietnam, couldn't believe the details of Doc's hand-to-hand combat with the North Vietnamese army. They couldn't believe that he jumped on a live grenade, and they couldn't believe that at one point, he was pronounced dead and stacked atop the other corpses to be bagged and tagged. His actions saved no fewer than five men that day. And still, much like Navy SEAL Edward Byers, he doesn't want to be called a hero.

"They call me a hero, but I look at the younger kids today willing to serve, and they are my heroes," he says. "I've dealt with tragedy my whole life. I've been wounded eight times, so my heroes are the guys who saved my life. I suffer from PTSD, and my disorder is activated when I think of the guys that died that I couldn't save. My worry was not when I was lying there wondering whether I was going to live. It was the times I was wishing I'd get killed so I could get off that hill and be reunited with my friends."

These days, Doc travels the country speaking to young servicemen and women, and he thanks them for their service. He also is the treasurer of the Medal of Honor Society, an extremely consequential organization, which you can learn more about on page 32.

"The men and women today that are fighting and are getting shot at are in just as much danger as I was," he says. "They're doing their best to stay alive and defend us and protect our ideals. I want to get the message out to the young kids that they should appreciate the armed forces."

Let's make this Memorial Day about more than just backyards and barbecues. Let's make it about the brave men and women — past, present and future — who volunteer to serve in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Coast Guard. And let's show them our appreciation. Watch ... I'll show you how it's done:

Thank you, Doc Ballard. Thank you, Edward Byers. Thank you, United States military, for protecting and defending us. Much respect.



Adam Pitluk  
Editor

Follow Adam on Twitter @adampitluk