

UNCOMMON VALOR

Sergeant Major Thomas P. Payne was awarded the Medal of Honor on the 19th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks that prompted him to join the military.

by Wendy McGonagall

On September 11, 2020, Batesburg-Leesville native, Sergeant Major Thomas P. Payne (Army) was awarded the Medal of Honor - the United States of America's highest and most-prestigious personal military decoration that is awarded to recognize U.S. military service members who have distinguished themselves by acts of valor. The award came for his heroic actions five years previous, on October 22, 2015, during a hostage rescue in Kirkuk Province, Iraq, in support of operation INHERENT RESOLVE.

Payne's military career began in 2002 right after high school when he enlisted in the army as an infantryman, inspired by a strong sense of duty to serve his country after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. He completed the Basic Airborne Course at Fort Benning, Georgia, in 2002 and the Ranger Indoctrination Program in early 2003, after which he was assigned as a rifleman in the 75th Ranger Regiment, where he served as a sniper and a sniper team leader until November 2007, the year he was selected for assignment to the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) at Fort Bragg, NC. Since then, he has served within USASOC as a special operations team member, assistant team sergeant, and instructor. Payne has been deployed multiple times to combat zones and received a Purple Heart in 2010 from serious wounds he suffered

from a grenade in Afghanistan. He recovered and, along with his teammate Master Sergeant Kevin Foutz, won the Army's Best Ranger Competition as a representative of U.S. Army Special Operations Command in 2012.

Throughout 2014, ISIS continued to expand its control over northern Iraq and quickly became notorious for executing or imprisoning anyone who went against their ideology. Near the town of Hawijah, located in the Kirkuk province of Iraq, ISIS had imprisoned more than 70 people into a small, two-building prison. The conditions were inhumane with prisoners being fed very little and forced to watch videotaped ISIS beheadings. The situation was urgent, and a pre-dawn raid and hostage rescue mission were planned for October 22, 2015, to be led by Kurdish forces and supported by U.S. Special Forces. Two members of the American troops were Master Sergeant Joshua L. Wheeler and then Sergeant First Class Thomas Payne.

Payne's team spent an entire week planning and rehearsing for the raid. When they received intelligence that freshly dug graves had been spotted - a sign that the hostages would likely be executed soon - they were given the green light to move out. The allied assault force reached the prison compound on American Ch-47 helicopters. As soon as they hit the ground, firefight was raging. Vision obscured by dust and smoke, Payne





maneuvered his team to the first building of the two-building prison compound. Almost immediately, Wheeler, who was at a separate location from Payne, was killed by ISIS gunfire.

Payne's team secured the first building and prepared to free the prisoners, cutting the lock on the prison door inside the building. Payne saw the hostage's expressions change from fear and desperation to excitement and joy once they realized they were being rescued. As they were being released, Payne received a call that the team in the second building of the prison compound, just 30 yards away, needed backup. The sounds of fire-fight were intense, and Payne knew they needed to move fast.

Under heavy enemy fire, Payne and his teammates moved to the roof of the second burning prison building. They attempted to enter from the roof, but ISIS fighters detonated suicide vests in the room below to collapse the roof. Payne was able to move his team to the ground

and look for another position to enter the building. While his team attempted to breach the building's fortified walls and windows, enemy fire wounded several of the Kurdish forces. According to the army's website, the following scene unfolded, cementing Payne's place in United States Military history:

"Through the smoke and chaos, Payne looked into the building's entryway and noticed the main prison door used the same type of lock he had seen in the first building. He knew he would be exposed to enemy fire if he attempted to cut the lock himself, but he also knew the hostages trapped inside the burning building would die if something wasn't done.

"Payne grabbed a set of bolt cutters and ran into the building to cut the first lock on the door. Smoke poured out of the entryway as Payne received enemy fire. After cutting the first lock, Payne moved back to a safer position to avoid incoming fire and recover smoke inhalation, but there was still a second lock



that needed to be cut. After the Kurdish forces tried unsuccessfully to cut the second lock, Payne again exposed himself to enemy fire and suffocating smoke to cut the lock and reach the hostages.

“Once the second lock was cut, the combined force rushed into burning building to reach the hostages and eliminate remaining threats. A call came over the radio that the building was beginning to collapse and the mandatory evacuation order was given. The hallways were thick with smoke, and they were receiving enemy fire, but there were still hostages inside.”

Many of the hostages were disoriented. Payne directed the large group to safety, at one point grabbing a man and pulling him down the hallway. Still under fire, Payne went back in a second time, dragging another man out of the building. Yet, a third time Payne entered to make sure everyone was out and gave the “last man” call. Still under enemy fire, the allied



Parachutist; Advanced Leader Course; Jumpmaster Course; Free Fall Jumpmaster Course; Joint Military Tandem Master Course; Senior Leader Course; Defense Language Institute (French); Special Forces Sniper Course; and Joint Special Operations Senior Enlisted Academy.

Payne’s awards and decorations include the Medal of Honor; Bronze Star

“...ONCE YOU’RE ABLE TO CONTROL YOUR FEAR, THAT’S THE BRIDGE TO PERSONAL COURAGE AND PERSONAL COURAGE IS CONTAGIOUS ON THE BATTLEFIELD.”

forces created a human wall to shield the hostages and safely get them out of the compound and to the helicopters. Payne and his team freed approximately 70 hostages from certain death. The October 22, 2015, mission was one of the largest hostage rescues in Special Operations history. President Trump’s official citation stated: “Sergeant First Class Payne’s gallantry under fire and uncommon valor are in keeping with the highest traditions of military service and reflect great credit upon himself, the United States Special Operations Command, and the United States Army.”

Payne received the Medal of Honor on the 19th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks that prompted him to join the military. Amy, the wife of his fallen comrade, was there to see him receive the award.

Payne is a graduate of numerous military schools and courses, including Basic Airborne Course; Ranger Indoctrination Program; Ranger School; Sniper Course; Basic Leader Course; Basic Demolition Course; Advanced Demolition Course; Advanced Land Navigation; Survive, Evasion, Resistance and Escape; Free Fall

Medal with Bronze “V” device and three Bronze Oak Leaf Clusters; the Purple Heart; Defense Meritorious Service Medal with two Bronze Oak Leaf Clusters; Meritorious Service Medal with one Bronze Oak Leaf Cluster; Joint Service Commendation Medal with Bronze “V” device; Army Commendation Medal with Bronze “V” device and one Silver Oak Leaf Cluster; Navy and Marine Corps Presidential Unit Citation; Joint Meritorious Unit Award; Valorous Unit Award; Meritorious Unit Commendation; Army Good Conduct Medal with Bronze Clasp and five Loops; National Defense Service Medal; Afghanistan Campaign Medal with three Bronze Stars; Iraq Campaign Medal with five Bronze Stars; Inherent Resolve Campaign Medal with two Bronze Stars; Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal; Global War on Terrorism Service Medal; Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development Ribbon with Numeral “3”; Army Service Ribbon; Overseas Service Ribbon; NATO Medal; Ranger Tab; Combat Infantryman Badge; Expert Infantryman Badge; Military Free Fall Jumpmaster Badge and Parachutist Badge.



Payne received a bachelor of science degree in strategic studies and defense analysis in 2017 from Norwich University. He is stationed at Fort Bragg, where he lives with his wife Allison, who he met while recovering from his 2010 battle wounds received in Afghanistan, and their three children. ■