



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on October 16, 2013

Army Officer Critical of Superiors Finally Receives Medal of Honor

A retired U.S. Army captain, who risked his life to recover wounded and fallen comrades during a 2009 battle against the Taliban in Afghanistan, has finally received the Medal of Honor, but an investigation is ongoing as to why the medal was so long in coming. President Barack Obama presented the nation's highest military honor to [Captain William D. Swenson](#) at a White House ceremony October 15, even as U.S. Representative Duncan Hunter (R-Calif.) launched an investigation into allegations that Swenson's Medal of Honor nomination was set aside because of his vocal criticism that higher-ups had refused to respond to his desperate calls for air cover during the intense seven-hour battle, negligence which Swenson said led to needless deaths.



According to [Yahoo News](#), the 34-year-old Swenson, a Seattle native who was on his second tour in Afghanistan, was serving as an advisor training members of the Afghan National Security Force when his team of U.S. trainers and Afghan soldiers was ambushed near the rural community of Ganjgal on the morning of September 8, 2009 by some 60 well-armed Taliban fighters. In the firefight that ensued, Swenson's team was quickly surrounded and outgunned by the Taliban, which ultimately killed five Americans and 10 Afghan soldiers, wounding 17 others. The Army said that but for Swenson's actions the bloodshed would have been far worse.

As reported in the [Army's official account](#) of the battle, over the many hours of continuous fighting, "Swenson braved intense enemy fire, and willfully put his life in danger against the enemy's main effort, multiple times in service of his fallen and wounded comrades, his unit, his country, and his endangered Afghan partners."

But what was not reported, noted Yahoo News, was that Swenson "also repeatedly radioed superiors at a nearby base to request air and artillery support to rescue pinned-down troops. Subsequent investigations determined that three Army officers rejected many of Swenson's pleas and failed to notify higher commands that troops were under fire."

Another participant in the battle that day, Marine Corps Sergeant Dakota Meyer, received the Medal of Honor last September for his actions, which included working alongside Swenson to retrieve the bodies of dead comrades from the battle site. While Meyer's medal nomination went through without a hitch, Swenson's inexplicably disappeared, Meyer and others charge, because of Swenson's bitter criticism of the military command that should have helped the soldiers surrounded in the Taliban ambush.

In an effort to secure the Medal of Honor for Swenson, Meyer wrote to the senior officer on the White



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House National Security Council, calling Swenson “the centerpiece for command and control in a raging firefight that never died down.” In his letter Meyer noted that during the desperate battle “Swenson controlled all the helos. He picked out targets and kept situational awareness, radioing cardinal directions and distances. Not everyone can do that when bullets are continuously hitting the side of your truck. Swenson was not the senior commander; he just took over and everyone deferred to him. To the extent that anyone was in charge on the chaotic battlefield over the course of six or seven hours, it was Captain Will Swenson.”

According to the [Military Times](#), Swenson unloaded in anger on military investigators looking into his charges that a nearby command center refused to respond to his requests for air support to beat back the Taliban ambushers. “When I’m being second-guessed by higher or somebody that’s sitting in an air-conditioned TOC, why [the] h*** am I even out there in the first place?” Swenson told investigators. “Let’s sit back and play Nintendo. I am the ground commander. I want that f***er, and I am willing to accept the consequences of that f***er.” Swenson added that “I’m not a politician. I’m just the guy on the ground asking for that ammunition to be dropped because it is going to save lives.”

According to news reports, at least two Army officers were severely reprimanded for negligence which contributed “directly to the loss of life which ensued.”

In his book published last year, *Into the Fire: A Firsthand Account of the Most Extraordinary Battle in the Afghan War*, Meyer noted that Combined Joint Task Force 82 was charged with handling Swenson’s Medal of Honor packet while the investigations into the battle were underway in 2009. Meyer wrote, however, that Swenson’s nomination “vanished into thin air, forgotten by everybody in the chain of command,” and speculated that Swenson’s bitter criticism of the command that should have come to his team’s rescue “conveyed the wrong message: failure to support advisors, failure to provide artillery support, failure to deliver timely air support, et cetera.”

According to an August 2012 report by the *Military Times*, Marine Gen. John Allen, the top commander in Afghanistan, took an interest in Swenson’s case “and eventually endorsed Swenson’s packet. It was subsequently endorsed by Marine Gen. James Mattis, commander of U.S. Central Command,” leading to Swenson belatedly receiving the medal over a year after Meyer.

Yahoo News reported that Army investigators “discovered there was an attempt to reduce Swenson’s original nomination to a lesser award before it vanished. That would have been in violation of Army and Defense Department regulations, since only the president has the authority to downgrade a Medal of Honor nomination.”

While retired Army General David Petraeus, commander of U.S. troops in Afghanistan at the time, told a [McClatchy news reporter](#) that he had “no recollection of seeing” Swenson’s Medal of Honor nomination packet, Army investigators discovered that Petraeus had actually signed the packet, which later vanished.

An Army spokesperson insisted that “in Swenson’s case, an official investigation determined his packet was lost as a result of high turnover within the organization recommending the award. The nomination packet was subsequently re-created and forwarded for review. The Army is reviewing ways to ensure this type of injustice does not happen again.”

But war historian Doug Sterner observed that “a Medal of Honor packet doesn’t get lost unless somebody wants it to get lost.”

Among those who are demanding answers into the strange disappearance of Swenson’s Medal of Honor



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nomination is U.S. Representative Duncan Hunter, a former Marine Corps officer, who called the Army's official account "crazy." Hunter, who has launched an official investigation, said that "the last thing you should have is a politicized Medal of Honor process." He charged that Swenson's severe criticism of the Army over the incident led to the vanished nomination. "He came out and was honest about what happened," said Hunter. "He was critical as an officer in the Army should be. You're not supposed to be a robot. You're supposed to voice your opinions, especially when things go tactically wrong."

Meanwhile Swenson, who said he [was forced into retirement](#) by the Army in 2011, has asked to be reinstated to active duty. The *Military Times* reported that Swenson "could rise to the rank of major once he rejoins. In order to successfully re-up, Swenson will have to pass a physical, a drug test, and other routine reviews. But officials were optimistic it would all fall into place."

Photo of Captain William D. Swenson receiving the Medal of Honor: AP Images



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