

Virtue In Action

Lieutenant Michael Murphy: The Man Behind the Medal

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FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION



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The Man Behind the Medal



He was polite. He was compassionate. He was the leader who “always stuck up for the underdog.” Those are the glowing words family, friends and fellow soldiers used to describe Lieutenant Michael Murphy, a Navy SEAL who recently was awarded America’s highest military medal - the Medal of Honor.

Although Murphy, 29, died in a firefight in Afghanistan’s mountains, his values live on in giving us a powerful lesson in **heroism**. Lt. Murphy is a hero in the sense we often think of – a man who demonstrated great **courage** and **fortitude** in risking his own life to save others. Lt. Murphy’s life also illuminates other aspects of heroism we often overlook-- the heroism of taking risks to defend and promote one’s beliefs and principles, and the heroism of possessing noble qualities such as compassion in desiring to help others.

Ordinary Boy, Extraordinary Morals

Growing up in Long Island, New York, Michael Murphy was known for his athletic ability. In a touching speech, President George W. Bush relayed the then-toddler’s love for sea, air and land—early signs he would be a Navy SEAL, part of an elite U.S. military team able to take on the most demanding and often covert, or secret, missions.

“When he was just 18 months old, he darted across a neighbor’s yard, and dove into the swimming pool,” Bush said during the October 22 ceremony honoring Murphy. “By the time his frantic parents reached him, Michael had swum to the other side with a big smile on his face. As he grew older, Michael learned to swim from one side of a nearby lake to the other—and he developed into a talented all around athlete.”

But Murphy was not only known for his physical strength, he was known for strength of character. He was humble and unfailingly considerate of others, earning the nickname “the protector.” His mom described him at the White House ceremony as “someone who always stuck up for the underdog” “One day in school, he got into a scuffle sticking up for a student with a disability,” Bush said of



Murphy. “It’s the only time his parents ever got a phone call from the principal—and they couldn’t have been prouder.”

And he never sought the spotlight, according to his mother, Maureen. “He always rolled up his sleeves to help people,” Maureen Murphy told the Navy Times. “In every picture we have, he was always in the background.” His father adding that he was “honest, kind, caring – probably the **antithesis** of what you would call a warrior.”

It was those qualities that made Murphy popular with his SEALs, though it was a difficult choice for him to join the military. Murphy had joined the services in 1999, graduating from SEAL training in 2001. His goal was to defend his nation against the terrorists who had masterminded the 9/11 attacks.

Murphy knew what he would be up against. His father, a Purple Heart Recipient and Vietnam War veteran, had himself faced combat and did not want his son to go war. Murphy, an excellent student, could have attended law school.

But he was determined to fight al-Qaeda, the terrorist group responsible for the 9/11 attacks, as well as attacks in London and Madrid. Al-Qaeda was based in the country of Afghanistan where it received support from the **Taliban**, a radical Islamic group that then ruled Afghanistan.

“Michael believed in what he was doing over there,” his father, Dan Murphy, told *Newsday* columnist Ellis Henican. “It wasn’t political at all. It was personal to him. He was there fighting the people who’d attacked the city he loved.” The younger Murphy, or “Mikey” and “Murph,” as he was called by his SEAL team, never lost sight of his mission. He wore a New York City firehouse patch on his uniform to honor the heroes of 9/11.

Courage in Battle

As a SEAL, Murphy was noted for his **loyalty** to his team, his compassion in helping others and ability to lead. Effective leaders often possess these qualities as those under their direction will place their trust in someone they know cares for their well being. President Bush noted that Murphy and his SEAL teams had succeeded in many attacks on Taliban.

On the day that Murphy lost his life, he and his team of three men were conducting a scouting mission in pursuit of a Taliban leader on a mountain ridge in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, local enemy forces became aware of the SEAL team’s presence. The four man SEAL team was

suddenly in a desperate position as 50 enemy fighters launched a three-sided attack and forced the SEAL team into a deep ravine.

All four men were wounded, according to the lone survivor, Petty Officer 2nd Class Marcus Luttrell, a good friend of Murphy’s. “We were hurting badly,” Luttrell told CNN. “We were out of ammo, and you know everybody, it was bad, it was real bad.”

The SEAL team would have normally been able to call for reinforcements and possibly air support with a satellite phone; but, the rugged ravine prevented successful transmission. The team’s communication operator was shot while trying to find an area from which he could call for help. Murphy, already badly wounded, determined that the only way to save his team would be for him to expose himself to enemy fire and move into a clearing where he could call in the team’s location and request for assistance.

Murphy was shot again, this time in the back. He dropped the handset, picked it up again and calmly completed his call for support, ending with a “thank you,” according to a Navy report of the incident. Murphy then returned to a position of cover and continued to fight until finally dying from his wounds. Witnessing this act of valiance was his friend and comrade, Luttrell, who wrote about it in his recently published book, “Soul Survivor.”

Luttrell wrote in an account, excerpted by the Navy Times. “He’d understood we had only one realistic chance, and that was to call in help. Knowing the risk, understanding the danger, in the full knowledge the phone call could cost him his life, Lieutenant Michael Patrick Murphy, walked out into the firestorm.”

Murphy fulfilled his **duty** to protect his team and his message made it through—a rescue helicopter with other commandos was en route. Unfortunately, the rescue helicopter was shot down by a rocket-propelled grenade from Taliban fighters, killing 8 additional SEALs and 8 Special Forces operators. The heroism of the commandos in the rescue force is also noteworthy. These men had full knowledge of the dangerous situation they were entering into; however, without hesitation they entered into the battle in the attempt to save their comrades. These young men are a powerful testimony to the virtues of courage, duty and loyalty.

During the battle, Luttrell blasted over a ridge by a rocket-propelled grenade and initially knocked unconscious, managed to crawl away with a bullet wound to one

leg, shrapnel wounds in both legs and three cracked vertebrae. Local villagers who found him refused to turn him over to the Taliban despite the group's demands and threats of killing anyone who helped the Americans. The villagers transmitted a message to a Marine outpost, which then organized Luttrell's rescue.

Luttrell keeps Michael's legacy alive: "Mikey was the best officer I've ever known," he wrote in "Sole Survivor." "An iron-souled warrior of colossal and almost unbelievable courage in the face of the enemy."

Other Examples of Heroism

Lt. Michael Murphy gave his life defending his friends, and fighting for his beliefs in battle. In the same country of Afghanistan there are other examples of heroism that don't involve war yet carry great risks. The Taliban is still trying to regain control of the country and has threatened anyone working with the Americans and freely elected government of Afghanistan. The Taliban has carried out this threat, torturing and killing hundreds of Afghans and foreign aid workers serving in schools, hospitals and in the government. Despite this danger, thousands of Afghans and foreign aid workers continue to help the Afghan nation in areas such as education and health care. These individuals are also living heroes.

Lt. Murphy's life is a powerful example of the fullness of heroism. He was courageous in placing his life at risk for his principles and in trying to save the lives of others, while also being heroic in living out the noble virtues of duty and compassion in helping others. Lt. Murphy and heroes serving others throughout the world show us that sometimes great sacrifice is needed to make the world a better place. And even if we aren't specifically called upon to put ourselves in harm's way, we can be everyday heroes by opposing injustice, carefully considering others' well being, and standing up for the underdogs we come across in our daily lives.

Vocabulary

Medal of Honor - "The Medal of Honor, established by joint resolution of Congress is awarded in the name of Congress to a person who, while a member of the Armed Services, distinguishes himself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while engaged in an action against any enemy of The United States.... The deed performed must have been one of personal bravery or self-sacrifice so conspicuous as to clearly distinguish the individual above his comrades and must have involved risk of life." - Congressional Medal of Honor official web site

Compassion: feeling of sympathy for the distress of others, with the desire to help

Hero: a person who is regarded as a model due to their acts of courage, or nobility of purpose and noble qualities

Courage: the capacity to meet danger without giving way to fear; to have the courage of one's convictions; to be willing to put one's opinions into practice

Fortitude: mental and emotional strength in facing difficulty, adversity, danger, or temptation. The ability to do what is right, despite of difficulty.

Loyalty: steadfast allegiance to one's homeland, government, or organization you participate in. Faithful to a person, ideal, custom, cause or duty

Taliban: a fundamentalist Muslim group that controlled Afghanistan from 1995 until 2001, when the U.S. military intervened and removed them from power

Duty: something that one is expected or required to do according to one's own standards, moral or legal obligation, especially as it relates to one's status as a citizen and/or members of various communities

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Lesson Objectives:

- To help students understand the virtue of heroism and other noble qualities that mark a hero
- Help students appreciate the heroism of those serving in our military and other noble pursuits, including humanitarian endeavors and fighting for freedom
- Help students understand the virtues of duty and loyalty
- Inspire students to consider what noble pursuits they might pursue in life



Virtues Highlighted:

Compassion - Feeling of sympathy for the distress of others, with the desire to help

Courage- the capacity to meet danger without giving way to fear

Duty- something that one is expected or required to do according to one's own standards, moral or legal obligation; especially as it relates to one's status as a citizen and/or members of various communities

Hero- a person who is regarded as a model due to their acts of courage, or nobility of purpose and noble qualities

Loyalty- steadfast allegiance to one's homeland, government, or organization you participate in. Faithful to a person, ideal, custom, cause or duty

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What specific event inspired Lt. Murphy to pursue a career in the military? What symbol did he wear to demonstrate this inspiration?
- 2) What heroic act earned Lt. Murphy the Medal of Honor? What does this medal represent? What virtues does it award?
- 3) What principles or causes do you believe are worthy of accepting risk to promote?
- 4) Do the risks or negative consequences of promoting an ideal only involve physical risks, or are there other types of risk that we may face in being courageous to promoting our beliefs?
- 5) What are other examples in the world today of people being courageous and taking significant risk to stand up for principles they believe in? (Two current examples are the monks in Myanmar and lawyers in Pakistan protesting for political freedom, in spite of being beaten and imprisoned.)
- 6) What are examples in the world today of people taking significant risk to assist others in need? (Current examples are humanitarian and aid workers in Afghanistan, Iraq and Darfur)
- 7) Of the compliments heaped upon Lt. Murphy by family, friends and President George W. Bush, which do you feel is most important?
- 8) Lt. Murphy had the reputation of defending the underdogs in life. In what ways can we do this in our schools and local communities?
- 9) Lt. Murphy's father and mother have said that in some ways he was the



“antithesis of a warrior.” What do you think they are referring to? What do you think our perception of a warrior should be?

Journal Writing Options:

- 1) Ask students to choose a hero from the “CNN Heroes” or “Medals of Honor” Web site that they think has lived out a life of courage and / or noble pursuits in a compelling way. Ask them to write a brief essay detailing how this person lives out these virtues and the background relevant to their story.
- 2) Ask students to choose a hero from their personal lives or local community that they think has lived out a life of courage and / or noble pursuits in a compelling way. Ask them to write a brief essay detailing how this person lives out these virtues and the background relevant to their story.
- 3) Write about a principle or cause you believe is worthy of accepting risk to promote?

Extended Learning Activities:

- 1) Have students create a physical memorial collage – using poster boards, images and words – in honor of Lt. Murphy, highlighting his most important contributions. They can gather information from the lesson and a collection of personal stories about him from “Born to Serve: the Michael Murphy Story, available on the Newsday Web site:
<http://www.newsday.com/news/specials/ny-murphy-seal-sg.0.6675676.storygallery>
- 2) Have students research the actions of monks in Burma who have stood up to their oppressive government, sometimes paying with their lives for protesting for democracy. Ask them to write a brief essay about why it is so important that the monks were moved to action, and explain how this is inspirational to them.
- 3) Ask the students to review a San Francisco Chronicle article about two college students who founded schools to help children in Afghanistan: “Two Afghan Women Reach Across World to Help Kids in Troubled Homeland” at: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/10/20/DDA2SQS8H.DTL>



Internet Resources:

“First Navy Medal of Honor since Vietnam to go to SEAL”
http://www.navytimes.com/news/2007/10/navy_seal_moh_071011w/

“Born to Serve: the Michael Murphy Story”
<http://www.newsday.com/news/specials/ny-murphy-seal-sg.0.6675676.storygallery>

“Bush Awards Medal of Honor to Navy Seal”
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21418436/>

Medal of Honor site
<http://www.medalofhonor.com/>

CNN Heroes Site
<http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/07/16/heroes.archive/>

“Press Release: President Bush Presents Medal of Honor to Lieutenant Michael P. Murphy, U.S. Navy”
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/10/20071022-11.html>

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