

Remarks by the Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
Navy Cross Presentation for GySgt. Brian Blonder
Iwo Jima War Memorial
Tuesday, 10 May, 2011

General Dunford, General Tryon, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us here at the Marine Corps War Memorial in order to honor Gunnery Sergeant Brian Blonder for his actions in Shewan, Afghanistan, in August 2008, actions as selfless in conduct as they were heroic in nature. I also want to specifically recognize those members of Gunnery Sergeant Blonder's family in the audience, especially his mother, Connie McAllister; his father, Edward Blonder; and his grandfather, Amos McAllister, who served in China after the end of the Second World War. You must be so proud of your son and grandson, thank you for coming.

The link to history today is almost palpable, because here at the Marine Corps Memorial, steeped in the legacy and traditions of the Corps, we stand in the shadows of giants. Those men immortalized in bronze behind me raised the flag of freedom over Iwo Jima, and in doing so helped advance the march across the Pacific and bring the Second World War to a victorious conclusion. Among a thousand stories of heroism that occurred on that island, few stood out more than the acts of Marine Gunnery Sergeant John Basilone, already a Medal of Honor recipient from Guadalcanal. His light continues to shine brightly in Marine Corps' history, and many of us know his story from the recent TV series *The Pacific*.

Heroes like John Basilone still walk among us. And far from standing in their shadow, these new heroes stand on their shoulders, continuing to win our country's freedom and earn new honor for the Corps. Today's ceremony gives voice to that truth, and I am honored to stand beside one of them, Gunnery Sergeant Brian Blonder.

The comparison to John Basilone is not casual, it was one made explicit by Gunny Blonder's platoon commander from 2008, Capt. Byron Owen, who in an e-mail from Afghanistan, where he is at present deployed, said:

“I have no doubt that GySgt Blonder will one day be added to the canon of Marine Corps legends whose heroic deeds are recounted at TBS and boot camp. GySgt Blonder is one of the most selfless and disciplined individuals I have ever met. He is relentless in the attack and never wavered for a second in his rugged determination to defeat the enemy regardless of the risk or danger involved.”

The Marine Corps at large also recognized the comparison and in 2010 selected Gunny Blonder from over 180,000 enlisted Marines as the 2010 recipient of the John Basilone award for combat leadership.

Gunny Blonder's story began in Plantation, Florida. He grew up in Deerfield Beach, where he was an Eagle Scout, played football, competed for the swim team and graduated from Deerfield high school in 1997. Having heard his grandfather's stories, after graduation he immediately enlisted in the Marine Corps because he wanted to serve his country, and this is a direct quote, “the Marines had the best looking uniforms.” That's true and it's fortunate, because he also wanted to fight and knew the Marines were the service to join to do that.

After boot camp, he went to the School of Infantry and was assigned to the 3rd Force Reconnaissance Company. Up until his transfer to Headquarters, Marine Corps last year, he never left Recon. He spent 13 straight years in the Operating Forces, deploying three times to Iraq between 2001 and 2007.

I just want everyone to think about that for a minute. Thirteen years in the Fleet, 13 straight years of putting everything on the line, first as a recon Marine, then as a team leader and then as a senior staff non-commissioned officer, the one whose job it is to always maintain calm, always be a leader, always be professional. The list of schools he attended in that time is simply amazing, Ranger School, Freefall, Combat Diver, Scout Sniper, Arctic survival. Those are just a few of the over two dozen specialized courses he has attended.

When he deployed to Afghanistan in 2008, it was as a consummate professional, a mentor to young officers and Marines and a leader.

On August 8th, 2008, Gunny Blonder was leading a clearance operation in Shewan, Afghanistan. Shewan, a major hub of Taliban activity and home to an estimated 250 fighters, was a roadblock to Coalition forces in the area seeking to transit Route 517. When his platoon was ambushed by an enemy RPG team, he reacted swiftly and decisively to eliminate the threat. At the same time, other elements of his platoon were ambushed and Gunny Blonder led the assault to get his Marines out of the kill zone, exposing himself repeatedly to small arms and RPG fire. Then he took the fight to the enemy and like John Basilone at Guadalcanal, led a flanking maneuver against an entrenched enemy position, rolling up the enemy's line until the hail of gunfire prevented further advance, causing him to call in danger close air support to destroy the remaining enemy position and win the battle.

Over the 8-hour action, Gunny Blonder and his Marines eliminated over 50 Taliban fighters from the battlefield. And bravery was the order of the day; at the Battle of Shewan, two Marines were awarded the Silver Star, five the Bronze Star with "V" and six the Navy Commendation Medal with "V."

Because of Gunny Blonder's actions on August 8 and over the subsequent months, events which would earn him the Bronze Star with "V," the insurgency's back was broken in the region, Route 517 was opened and the insurgents grew afraid of going out at night, for fear of his Marines.

For his actions, Gunny Blonder will be remembered within the Corps for generations. Young recruits will learn his name and they will seek to emulate his example. But that is only the lesser part of his legacy. The greater part will be the hundreds of Marines he has led safely through combat in Iraq and Afghanistan and the hundreds of Marines he has trained to become the backbone of the Corps's reconnaissance force. What each of them has done, what they have yet to do and the lessons they learned from Gunny Blonder that will be passed on to their own Marines, that is his real legacy.

Gunny, thank you again for your service. I wish I had the words adequate to express the thanks of the Department of the Navy and the United States. Mrs. (Connie) McAllister, Mr. (Edward) Blonder, thank you for the son that you raised, and thank you for the hundreds of sleepless nights that you endured while he was deployed in service to our country.

For all of us, I ask that tonight we also remember those that could not be here, those that Gunny Blonder represents, the more than 20,000 Marines still deployed, still standing the watch so the rest of us may sleep in peace.

Thank you all again for coming. Godspeed.