

Published in Politico on March 29, 2012

Most Americans don't know about Corp. Jason Dunham, private first class; Ross McGinnis, master at arms second class, Michael Monsoor or Sgt. Rafael Peralta. But they should.

These brave Americans are just a few of the nation's military heroes who lost their lives in Iraq. What they also have in common are split-second decisions to smother grenades with their own bodies - sacrificing their lives to protect others.

For their actions, Dunham, McGinnis and Monsoor were awarded the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest award for combat valor. Peralta was not. Instead, he was awarded the Navy Cross - after his Medal of Honor nomination was downgraded by then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates.

Peralta was one of thousands of Marines fighting in the Second Battle of Fallujah in November 2004. When clearing a house, he and his Marines faced close-quarter fire, and a fragment from a ricocheted bullet hit him in the back of the head. He was on the ground and wounded when a grenade came through a window, within his reach. "Without hesitation," the Navy Cross citation states, he reached out and grabbed the grenade, absorbing the blast and shielding his fellow Marines only feet away.

The Marine Corps recommended Peralta for the Medal of Honor after an exhaustive investigation, supported by seven eyewitness accounts. The Navy agreed - and submitted the nomination to Gates. What happened next was unprecedented.

Gates convened a review panel, comprised of pathologists and other experts, solely to investigate Peralta's nomination. The panel determined that he could not have knowingly pulled the grenade into his body and that the explosive detonated one to three feet from his left knee — not underneath him.

This finding conflicted with the eyewitness testimony of the Marines. It contradicted the Marine Corps' investigation. It superseded the Navy's review and it disregarded the physical evidence used by the preliminary investigators. Gates then abruptly closed the case. Citing the panel's findings, he refused multiple requests to reconsider.

There is now evidence under review by the Navy that proves Peralta did exactly what his fellow Marines say he did. A new report from a forensic pathologist, Vincent DiMaio, indicates that Peralta's head wound would not have prevented further action. There is also video taken by a Marine combat cameraman, disproving that the grenade detonated one to three feet from Peralta's leg. In the video, taken soon after the grenade detonated, his leg is fully intact and no blood or injury is visible. The injury is limited to his upper body.

The fact that Peralta was denied the Medal of Honor in the first place is as much of an injustice as it is a disservice to the men and women of the Marine Corps. Now that the Navy is undertaking its review, based on the new evidence, there is new hope for Peralta.

The Peralta family has not accepted the Navy Cross. They believe that Peralta still deserves the award he should have received years ago. With the help of the Navy and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, they may finally have the opportunity to accept an award on his behalf.