

CHICAGO TEAMSTERS JOINT COUNCIL 25



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SON OF TEAMSTER HONORED AS MILITARY HERO **Indiana Resident Receives Silver Star for Bravery in Afghanistan**

It's the middle of May. But 27-year-old Zachary Swelfer isn't by the pool in his hometown of Merrillville, Indiana. He's in Afghanistan, on patrol in a poppy field with the 2nd Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment of Company A. And more than 300 yards ahead, two of his comrades are about to be ambushed by the Taliban.

The son of longtime Teamsters Local 142 member Edward Swelfer, Zachary used to spend his days as a Merrillville auto mechanic. But now he's making a career out of the military. And for his heroism in this summer's close combat engagement, the U.S. Army awarded Zachary the Silver Star last week.

The young soldier remains humble about his actions in the engagement, even as the Army bestowed upon him its third-highest honor for bravery in combat.

"It's not really too big a deal," Zachary said. "I did my job."

His heroism at hand began as the two leaders of Zachary's platoon—Cpl. Aaron Barrett and Spc. Chad Brown—took their patrol into the village of Zangabad in Afghanistan's Kandahar province. With Zachary and other soldiers approximately 1,000 feet behind them, Barrett and Brown entered an alleyway, marching in a maze of mud brick buildings. Just as the alley began to curve, two Taliban fighters suddenly appeared before them, opening fire no more than 15 feet away.

Instinctively, Barrett dove for cover behind a nearby stump as Brown hit the dirt and began exchanging rounds with the enemy. And just as quickly as the shooting began, Barrett found himself trapped, caught in the reigning crossfire.

As Brown continued firing, the gun of one of the Taliban fighters unexpectedly jammed, leaving the fighter no option but to flee. At that moment, Barrett looked behind him to find Zachary charging up the narrow alley, attacking the Taliban with his M-4 rifle.

"[Barrett] was pinned down bad. I wanted to get him out of there," Zachary said. "I don't know how I made it through that alley. There were rounds all over the place."

The Taliban fire remained constant as Zachary—equipped as well with a grenade launcher—continued to charge. As the soldier reached his pinned comrade, Barrett tossed off a fragmentation grenade, followed immediately by

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Zachary's own launch of an M-203 grenade. The bombs successfully but temporarily suppressed the enemy.

Continuing with covering fire a few feet away, Brown was soon joined by other members of the platoon, giving Zachary and Barrett their chance to move to safer ground.

Having regained its ranks, the platoon began moving back down the alley—20, 30 yards at a time. Without warning, additional Taliban fighters appeared before them, firing on the U.S. soldiers from a network of nearby buildings and barricades. And it was at that moment when final relief for the platoon arrived, in the form of American Kiowa helicopters up above.

The gunships instantly opened fire on the surrounding Taliban fighters, rattling off .50-caliber machine guns and Hellfire missiles. The liberating airstrike gave Zachary and the soldiers on the ground more than enough coverage to free themselves from hostile fire.

"It was intense, that's for sure," Zachary said. "But we're all alive and we all made it back."

Now back at his base at Fort Knox, Kentucky, Zachary has had time to reflect on his most recent tour of duty and humbly accept his Silver Star. In its ceremony last week, the Army cited Zachary's heroic charge on the enemy and courage to see his comrades returned to safety.

And in attendance to see Zachary receive his award was his father, a proud Teamster truck driver with Omega Construction. "I'm quite honored that he got the award and recognition," Edward Swelfer said. "And I'm just glad he's home safe."

Other members of Zachary's platoon were also honored for their heroic actions with the Valorous Unit Award.

But even with such special recognition, Zachary ultimately said that a word like hero still doesn't apply to him.

"I'd do it again," he said. "I put all my men first. I take care of them. The real heroes are the guys that never made it back, the guys who lost their lives over there."