

# THE WEIGHT OF VALOR

*An interview with Medal of Honor recipient Edward C. Byers Jr., a member of the Knights of Columbus, about his military career and Catholic faith*

As a young Navy medic in SEAL training, Edward Byers Jr. covered his barrack room with notes — reminders of his daily goals: *Did you work out today? Did you run? Did you swim?* And set in capital letters: *DID YOU PRAY TODAY?*

Byers' Catholic faith strengthened him as he pursued his dream to become one of the Navy's elite special operators. He was assigned to his first SEAL (Sea, Air and Land) team in 2004 and later served with the Naval Special Warfare Development Group. During his 21-year career, he deployed overseas 11 times, including multiple combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. And through those years of war, he continued to make time for prayer, seeking God's protection and peace.

He prayed Dec. 8, 2012, as he and his team hiked in darkness toward a Taliban compound in the mountains of Afghanistan. Their mission was to rescue an American doctor who had been kidnapped. Byers prayed again at the end of mission, over his brother SEAL, Petty Officer 1st Class Nicolas Checque. The doctor was safe, but Checque had been mortally wounded.

For his heroic actions that night, Byers became the first living SEAL since the Vietnam War to receive the U.S. military's highest decoration, the Medal of Honor (see his award citation, page 11). President Barack Obama bestowed the medal on Byers in a White House ceremony attended by Byers' wife, Madison, and daughter, Hannah, in February 2016.



*Medal of Honor recipient Edward Byers Jr. prays at the grave of his Navy SEAL teammate Nicolas Checque in Arlington National Cemetery. Checque was killed during a rescue mission in Afghanistan. (Photo by Greg Gibson)*

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*Pictured here in Afghanistan in 2012, Byers deployed overseas 11 times during his career as a Navy SEAL.*

Byers retired from active duty Sept. 19 as a master chief and is now pursuing a master of business administration degree at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. As a board member of the Medal of Honor Foundation, he also travels throughout the nation to promote the virtues embodied by the medal. He likewise serves on the honorary board of the Navy SEAL Foundation and the advisory board of the C4 Foundation, charities that support SEALs and their families.

Byers joined the Knights of Columbus in Virginia last year and spoke with *Columbia* on Sept. 29, the feast of St. Michael the Archangel.

**COLUMBIA: Can you tell us a little about your family and your faith background?**

**MASTER CHIEF EDWARD C. BYERS JR.:** I grew up in northern Ohio on a small farm in a town called Grand Rapids. My parents divorced when I was 5 years old. They both had children from previous marriages, and my siblings are much older than me. I lived with my father, who was Catholic, but my faith really stemmed in large part from my brother-in-law, Trevor, who is now a permanent deacon. When I was still in grade school and he was dating my sister, he introduced me to the Latin Mass and had a big impact on me, drawing me to the faith.

**COLUMBIA: What led you to choose a career in the Navy and train to be a medic?**

**BYERS:** My father was in the Navy at the very end of World War II. He never really talked about his time in the service, but we were a very patriotic family. The American flag was always flying outside, and the Fourth of July was probably the most celebrated holiday of the year.

When I was in junior high in the early '90s, a lot of books and movies on Vietnam and the Navy SEAL community started coming out. I became fascinated with the concept of an elite, mythical group of guys doing really incredible and dangerous things.

By the time I was a senior, I knew I was going to join the military. School was never really a priority. My father was a carpenter and had a small general contracting company, so I would have done construction if I didn't join the military.

Becoming a medic was my mother's idea. If I didn't like the military, she said, I would have something to fall back on in the civilian world.

After I joined as a Navy hospital corpsman, I learned that the SEAL community was over-manned and deferring corpsmen who wanted to try out. I had joined to be a SEAL, so the closest thing was to go with the Marines. That's how I started off.

**COLUMBIA:** Of course, you did eventually apply and train to become a SEAL. What was that like?

**BYERS:** While I was with the Marines, I had to fill out a special request to go to BUD/S — Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training. I had spent almost three years with the Marines, and then 9/11 happened. Four months later, my request to go to BUD/S training was approved. Off to San Diego I went.

SEAL training was hardest I had pushed myself in my life, and there's this self-doubt that creeps in. I distinctly remember a few times when, on the brink of breaking and wanting to quit, I would say little prayers like, "If this is something you want me to do, I don't know how much more I can take. If I can just get a 30-second break, I think that would be enough for me to go on." And next thing you know, the instructors would blow the whistle for us to take a break at a critical moment. I never will forget that.

**COLUMBIA:** What role has your faith played in your military service?

**BYERS:** When I entered the military, I was really diving into Catholic apologetics. This is right around the time that authors like Scott Hahn were writing books like *Rome Sweet Home*. I wanted to really understand the faith and be able to explain it to other people. So, when I was with the Marines, it was a deeply religious time in my life.

In our unit, a few of us who were Catholics would go to Mass together. My first deployment with them, my first time away from home, was in 2000. Not every ship has a priest, and I started leading prayer groups when the priests couldn't get there for Mass. I created pamphlets that I passed out. We started to get a pretty good following from that.

You know, I believe a lot in being at the right place at the right time. For example, I remember porting in Dubrovnik, Croatia, where we were doing a monthlong exercise with the Croatian army and staying in old barracks. I picked a bunk at random and when I lay down, I saw a picture of the Blessed Virgin Mary staring down at me from the bunk above. I took it, and I still have that image today, framed in our house.

## Medal of Honor Mission | Dec. 8, 2012

Dr. Dilip Joseph, an American aid doctor, was abducted by Taliban forces Dec. 5, 2012. Three days later, Chief Petty Officer Special Warfare Operator Edward C. Byers Jr. and a team of fellow Navy SEALs hiked four hours through the mountains to reach the small, single-room building where Joseph was being held in a remote area of Afghanistan. Byers' actions in the engagement that followed are described in his Medal of Honor citation:

As the rescue force approached the target building, an enemy sentry detected them and darted inside to alert his fellow captors. The sentry quickly reemerged, and the lead assaulter [Petty Officer 1st Class Nicolas Checque] attempted to neutralize him. Chief Byers with his team sprinted to the door of the target building.

As the primary breacher, Chief Byers stood in the doorway fully exposed to enemy fire while ripping down six layers of heavy blankets fastened to the inside ceiling and walls to clear a path for the rescue force. The first assaulter [Checque] pushed his way through the blankets, and was mortally wounded by enemy small arms fire from within.

Chief Byers, completely aware of the imminent threat, fearlessly rushed into the room and engaged an enemy guard aiming an AK-47 at him. He then tackled another adult male who had darted towards the corner of the room. During the ensuing hand-to-hand struggle, Chief Byers confirmed the man was not the hostage and engaged him.

As other rescue team members called out to the hostage, Chief Byers heard a voice respond in English and raced toward it. He jumped atop the American hostage and shielded him from the high volume of fire within the small room. While covering the hostage with his body, Chief Byers immobilized another guard with his bare hands....

The medal citation concludes:

His bold and decisive actions under fire saved the lives of the hostage and several of his teammates. By his undaunted courage, intrepid fighting spirit, and unwavering devotion to duty in the face of near certain death, Chief Petty Officer Byers reflected great credit upon himself and upheld the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.



Senior Chief Special Warfare Operator (SEAL) Edward Byers speaks during his induction into the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes March 1, 2016. • Opposite page: Byers wore this St. Michael the Archangel patch during all his combat operations. In Latin, it reads: "St. Michael Pray for Us."

**COLUMBIA: You have a particular devotion to St. Michael the Archangel. Can you say a word about that?**

**BYERS:** War is not pretty, and it's not kind. A lot of horrific things happen, things that impact you psychologically and emotionally.

So I really turned to St. Michael the Archangel, because he's the patron saint of police and the military. The Prayer to St. Michael — "defend us in battle, be our protection" — really struck home for me.

During my very first deployment to Iraq, in 2005, we were walking up to a group of Navy SEALs that were leaving. I saw a guy wearing a colorful patch of St. Michael that said in Latin "Sancte Michael Ora Pro Nobis."

I don't know what compelled me, but I just walked right up to him and said, "That's a really cool patch. Can I have it?" I don't know who this guy was to this day, but without hesitation he just gave it to me and said, "It protected me while I was here, and I hope it does the same for you."

I wore that patch on my uniform for every single operation I've ever been a part of.

**COLUMBIA: Do you find it significant that the rescue mission for which you received the Medal of Honor coincided with the feast of the Immaculate Conception?**

**BYERS:** That is something that gives me chills thinking about.

By 2012, I had already been going to war for seven straight years. I was gone 280 to 300 days a year on average, and every single year there's a deployment to a war zone. I had seen a lot of combat by then.

We were in a pretty remote region of Afghanistan, and access to church wasn't readily available. So the feast day wasn't something I was tracking at that time. It was only in the days afterward that I started to reflect.

There was also time to process the fact that we had just lost an incredible warrior and teammate, Nic Checque. He was right in front of me when that happened, and it could have

easily been me. Only God knows why he was taken and I wasn't. So you think about that and it's humbling, to say the least.

I ask God, "What is your intent with me? Why am I still here?" I reflect on that a lot. I don't believe in coincidences.

**COLUMBIA:** You have described the Medal of Honor as a "weight" as well as an honor. Can you elaborate?

**BYERS:** No one ever thinks they're going to become a Medal of Honor recipient. Usually it's given posthumously, for heroics the likes of which you can't fathom.

So it really makes you take a step back and go, "Well, what is my purpose? What am I supposed to do with this exalted position?"

I see it as a chance to witness to my faith and give glory to God. I mention God and St. Michael at every single speech I give. I have an obligation to do that because of the graces I have received.

With any great honor comes responsibility, and with responsibility comes an aspect of burden. Receiving the Medal of Honor is a lifelong commitment.

There are only 71 living recipients, and our oldest is from World War II — Woody Williams is 96 years old. He's been a recipient for 70-plus years, and he still travels around the country promoting the values of the Medal of Honor, which are sacrifice, integrity, patriotism, courage, commitment and citizenship.

I never thought in a million years that I would be retiring at 40. I thought I would be a SEAL for 30 years. But it basically became too difficult to honor the duties of a Medal of Honor recipient and also be an effective SEAL — there is an unwritten rule that once you become a recipient you can no longer go into combat. So receiving the medal prevented me from doing the job that I loved doing.

And with the commitments of being a recipient comes a constant reminder of those who sacrificed — Nic Checque, and many other brothers and teammates too.

I have a responsibility to recognize the sacrifices of all those who had a role in my becoming a recipient. I just was in the right spot at the right time, doing the right thing. It could have easily been someone else, but it just happened to be me.

Nic Checque is the one who gave the ultimate sacrifice, and he did it heroically. There are lots of emotions that revolve around being a recipient and having to relive those memories all the time.

**COLUMBIA:** Can you speak a bit about your life as a husband and a father, and the challenges of balancing military and family commitments?

**BYERS:** My wife is an incredible woman. She's extremely tough. She's had to be, as a military wife and especially the wife of a SEAL. The beautiful part is that we've been together since I was a corpsman with the Marines, so she's been a witness to the entire process. I think that has really helped keep us together. I don't know the exact figure, but the divorce rate in the special operations community is significantly higher than the national average.

Relationships aren't perfect, and perfect isn't real. Marriage takes work, and we've been able to manage the ups and downs. I think it's a testament to both of us of realizing that, "for better or worse," you stick together and you figure out ways to get through.

It's particularly hard for someone to be at home and never have any idea what you're doing.

In our community, you don't talk about what you're doing and might not have any contact for months.

It takes a lot of faith, courage and commitment to be in that relationship.

And we've been blessed to have a beautiful daughter, who was born right before my very first deployment to Iraq. She is going into high school now. She is a competitive figure skater and extremely talented. For most of her life, I was gone away at war, and she didn't know if her dad was going to come home.

I am at home a lot more now, but I'm still gone quite a bit because being a recipient has you on the road a lot. So, we just try to focus on having quality time together and make the most of it when we are with each other.

As a husband and a father, I just do my best to honor my commitments and recognize how resilient and strong my wife and daughter are.

**COLUMBIA:** How did you learn about the Knights of Columbus, and what led you to join the Order last year?

**BYERS:** I've known about the Knights of Columbus for a long time, since I was growing up. I always had an inclination to join the Knights, but there's only so much time and bandwidth that you have in life. So I pushed off joining.

Finally, I came to the realization that if I don't join, I'm going to keep having this excuse that I don't have time. If I join, I'll start making some time.



I joined because the Knights of Columbus is like the religious extension to how I live my life in the SEAL community.

The military does humanitarian work all around the world following natural disasters. And through the Medal of Honor Society's character development program, we work to instill the virtues I mentioned earlier.

The Knights of Columbus has the same kind of concept — focused on values like family and charity toward people at home and abroad, doing your part to make a better society. There's also unity and fraternity, which is like our brotherhood — a group of like-minded individuals coming together and the power of coming together as a team, combining everybody's goodwill and nature and intelligence and resources. Finally, there's patriotism and pride in one's country.

These tenets just really fall in line with who I am.

**COLUMBIA: Do you have any words of advice or wisdom to share with your brother Knights?**

**BYERS:** First, if you're a Catholic man thinking about joining the Knights of Columbus, there's no better time to do it than right now. Things will naturally work out, and you'll end up making time to do your part.

For those who are already members, I would remind them to look out for your brothers and sisters to the left and to the right of you. An important cause for me is veteran suicide. An astronomical number of veterans commit suicide. And it's because they have lost hope and don't have that support network they once had.

There's so much depression in the world, and I think it comes from a lack of hope. Never forget about those people on the margins. Focus energy on those who need help the most. Help them feel that they're important, and help instill the virtues that God intends for us to have — faith, hope and love. You can bring hope through your good nature and the works you can do for somebody.

When I was first becoming a medic, an instructor said, "Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care." People need to know that you care about them.

And as we deal with everything that life throws at us, the Church invites us to come back in communion with Christ. Even when we fall, there's hope to rise again. ♦

Follow Byers on social media: @frogmanmohvi



*Byers is pictured at the gravesite of his father, a World War II veteran. He explained, "My father passed away at 85, three weeks before the deployment when we conducted the rescue mission for Dr. Joseph. We cremated him and I said, 'We'll bury dad when I get back home.' I planned his funeral from Afghanistan. Within a week after I got back off deployment, we buried him in Arlington National Cemetery in honor to his service in the Navy."*