

Parents to share son's Medal of Honor with all Marines

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(November 16, 2006) — SCIO — Deb and Dan Dunham have just returned from the place where decisions about the war in Iraq are made to the place where they are felt.

They have come home from the Washington, D.C., area, where President Bush last week announced their son, Marine Cpl. Jason Dunham, would receive the Medal of Honor — the highest U.S. military decoration — for sacrificing his life to save the lives of two other Marines.

The announcement came on Dunham's birthday. He would have been 25.

Back in Allegany County on Wednesday, there are memories of other birthdays: Deb Dunham cooking birthday dinners of her son's choosing — sloppy joes, french fries and creamed corn when he was younger, steaks on the grill later on.

Deb Dunham calls the Medal of Honor "the birthday gift we couldn't give him."

"It was probably the best gift he ever received," she says in the family's single-story home.

She teaches home economics at the Scio school. Dan is a factory worker.

The Dunhams have three other children, ages 13, 17 and 23, but since Jason's death consider every Marine their child as well.

"You're welcome any time," Dan Dunham tells a Marine who has just arrived from Buffalo to check on the couple. "You're part of the family."

In fact, the Medal of Honor, once the family receives it, will belong to all of the troops who have sacrificed like their son did, but have not gotten the recognition, the Dunhams said.

"We'll accept that medal, it'll be here," says Dan Dunham, who served in the Air Force three years, "but it'll belong to all the soldiers."

Bush, during the Nov. 10 dedication of a Marine museum, described his unit's effort to stop a convoy of cars on April 22, 2004, that made the squad leader Dunham a hero.

"As he moved to search one of the vehicles, an insurgent jumped out and grabbed

the corporal by the throat," Bush said.

During hand-to-hand combat with the insurgent, Dunham called out to his fellow Marines: "No, no, no. Watch his hand!"

"Moments later, an enemy grenade rolled out," Bush said. "Corporal Dunham did not hesitate. He jumped on the grenade to protect his fellow Marines. He used his helmet and his body to absorb the blast."

Deb and Dan Dunham count among the other heroes from that day the doctor who held their son's hand as he lay mortally wounded in a field hospital. They believe that act of kindness gave their son the strength to live long enough to make it to a Bethesda, Md., hospital, where his parents could be with him when he died.

"That's a gift to us," Dan Dunham says.

The Dunhams stopped at their son's grave on the way home from the airport Tuesday night.

As Deb Dunham sees it: "Just to say we're home. 'You did good.'"