

J. Connelly Open Forum Box 1/10/2023

El Dorado County Citizens Tribute to the Law Enforcement Officers
of January 6, 2021



THE CONGRESSIONAL GOLD MEDAL

AWARDED BY CONGRESS ON DECEMBER 6, 2022 TO OFFICERS OF THE UNITED STATES CAPITOL POLICE AND THE WASHINGTON, D.C. METROPOLITAN POLICE DEPARTMENT FOR THEIR DEFENSE OF THE UNITED STATES CAPITOL ON JANUARY 6, 2021



THE PRESIDENTIAL CITIZENS MEDAL

AWARDED BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES ON JANUARY 6, 2023 TO OFFICERS FOR PROTECTING THE UNITED STATES CAPITOL ON JANUARY 6, 2021

OFFICERS BRIAN SICKNICK (POSTHUMOUSLY), HOWARD LIEBENGOOD (POSTHUMOUSLY), JEREMY SMITH (POSTHUMOUSLY), CAROLINE EDWARDS, AQUILINO GONNELL, DANIEL HODGES, MICHAEL FANONE, HARRY DUNN, EUGENE GOODMAN

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon. On behalf of the citizens of El Dorado County, we are here to pay tribute to the law enforcement officers who valiantly protected the Congress from a violent attack on January 6, 2021.

Over the course of several hours, officers were assaulted in hand-to-hand combat, plus weapons including bear spray, metal bars, clubs and bats ... even the American flag. One officer was beaten and tasered directly underneath a "Blue Lives Matter" flag as the crowd chanted, "Kill him with his gun!"

The attackers wore helmets, armored vests, goggles and respirators, and communicated amongst themselves on secure radios. They carried handguns, knives, axe handles, hammers, and pitchforks. The crowd repeatedly called for Vice-President Pence and Speaker of the House Pelosi to be hanged, as they built a gallows with a noose outside the Capitol for inspiration.

Every member of Congress and their staffs were kept safe from harm by officers who bravely fulfilled their duty. The physical and emotional toll of their defense included over 140 officers injured by the mob and 15 hospitalized, with some injuries so severe they ended the officer's careers. Five officers died as a result of January 6th, four by their own hand. Other officers continue to suffer from the events of that day.

We ask you today to honor them all, to thank them for defending our republic, and to remember the sacrifices of the fallen.

THE U.S. CAPITOL ATTACK

On January 6, 2021, the U.S. Capitol and grounds were closed to the public. Inside the Capitol, Congress and the Vice-President of the United States convened in accordance with the U.S. Constitution to certify the results of the 2020 Electoral College vote, starting at 1 p.m.

Outside the Capitol, United States Capitol Police officers guarded the building and the perimeter of a restricted area, marked by prominent signs noting the area was closed.

At approximately 12:50 p.m. a large group of Proud Boys gathered outside the entrance of the Capitol's "Pennsylvania Walkway," where the group's leader conferred with Ryan Samsel, a Pennsylvania parolee with a history of assault. Samsel then confronted officers including Caroline Edwards, who became the first officer to be injured on January 6th.

Samsel's confrontation caused Edwards to be pushed into a stairway and become unconscious, as the crowd rushed past her to storm the Capitol. After regaining consciousness, Edwards regrouped with other officers on the Capitol's lower west terrace, approximately 450 feet away.

Thus began the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol, and hours of violent assaults against its guardians.

OFFICERS EDWARDS AND SICKNICK - LOWER WEST TERRACE

Capitol Police Officers, assisted by reinforcements from Washington, DC's Metropolitan Police Department, immediately formed a line across the Capitol's lower west terrace, in order to keep the mob away from the Capitol entrances above them.

Officer Edwards was on that line, despite suffering a concussion from her earlier assault. She testified to a Congressional committee investigating the attack, "Never in my wildest dreams did I think that as a police officer I would find myself in the middle of a battle. ... I'm not combat-trained, and that day it was just hours of hand-to-hand combat, hours of dealing with things that were way beyond any a law officer has ever trained for. I remember that moment of stepping behind the line and seeing the absolute war zone that the west front had become."

At approximately 2:20 p.m., officer Brian Sicknick was sprayed in the face by a powerful chemical. Edwards noticed Sicknick holding his head in his hands, ghostly pale. She testified, "My cop alarm bells went off because if you get sprayed with pepper spray, you're going to turn red. He turned just about as pale as this sheet of paper, and so I looked back to see what had hit him, what had happened, and that's when I got sprayed in the eyes as well."

Officer Sicknick collapsed at the Capitol at around 10 p.m. and was taken to a local hospital. He suffered two strokes on January 7th and died that evening at 42 years of age.

Officer Sicknick served in the New Jersey Air National Guard from 1997 to 2003 before joining the Capitol Police in 2008. He laid in honor at the Capitol Rotunda on February 2nd and 3rd, 2021 and was then laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery. Officer Sicknick is survived by his partner Sandra Garza, his parents, and two siblings.

OFFICER AQUILINO GONNELL - LOWER AND UPPER WEST TERRACE

Ultimately, the officers on the lower west terrace would be outnumbered by approximately 60 to 1. Though their line was overwhelmed by unrelenting violence, they held the line long enough for Congress to be evacuated, before regrouping to protect a vital Capitol entrance that they held throughout the remainder of the attack.

Sergeant Aquilino Gonnell was equipped with riot gear, including a helmet and shield. Despite that protection Gonnell received injuries severe enough to end his 17 year career and he medically retired in December, 2022.

“We were savagely beaten and easily overpowered” Gonnell has said. “It was like a medieval battleground. ... Over the course of the five-hour struggle, my hands were bloodied from being smashed by a stolen police baton. My right foot and left shoulder were so damaged that I needed multiple surgeries to repair them. My head was hit with such force with a pipe that I no doubt would have sustained brain damage if not for my helmet. I have spent a year and a half in physical therapy for chronic pain that I have been told will never go away.”

Officer Gonnell’s family immigrated from the Dominican Republic when he was twelve years old. Seven years later he joined the U.S. Army and served in Iraq, before joining the Capitol Police Department in 2006. On January 6, 2021 Gonnell was repeatedly called a “traitor” and hit with an American flag and pole during the mob’s assaults.

Gonnell’s retirement letter ended with, “Thank you for giving me the ability to serve my country all these years. ... I will always support and defend the United States and my fellow police officers as they stand between order and chaos.”

OFFICER MICHAEL FANONE - UPPER WEST TERRACE

Officer Michael Fanone joined the Capitol Police Department at age 21, in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center. After a couple of years he transferred to the Metropolitan Police Department, serving as a narcotics and violent crimes officer for nearly twenty years.

As an undercover officer, Fanone had not worn a uniform in over a decade, and was not called to respond to the Capitol. Fanone told his partner, an Army veteran who served in Afghanistan, "We're going. Suit up." They immediately went to the front line of an intense battle in a tunnel entrance to the lower Capitol, where Fannone led the effort to push the mob out of the tunnel.

As the mob was repelled, officer Fanone was grabbed around the neck and pulled into the violent crowd. His attacker yelled "I got one!" while dragging Fanone away from his fellow officers.

Fanone was beaten and tasered multiple times in the neck. His attackers stole his badge, radio and ammunition, while others lunged for his gun and chanted "Kill him with his own gun." All that occurred directly underneath a Blue Lives Matter flag, as Fanone was completely surrounded and at the mercy of a violent mob.

Officer Fanone managed to yell "I've got kids," as an urgent appeal to the crowd's humanity. A few of the mob helped him back to his partner, where Fanone collapsed and remained unconscious while being dragged to safety inside the Capitol.

Officer Fanone suffered a heart attack, a concussion, and post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of his assault. He resigned from the Metropolitan Police Department in December, 2021 and continues to speak out about January 6th.

OFFICER DEATHS - POST JANUARY 6, 2021

After January 6, 2021 four officers took their lives as a result of what they endured that day. Please stand with us as we honor their service and sacrifice.

CAPITOL POLICE OFFICER HOWARD LIEBENGOOD

Capitol police officer Howard Liebengood served for 15 years and died at age 51. He is survived by his widow Serena and two siblings.

In November, 2022 Liebengood's death was designated as being in the line of duty, enabling his family to receive new benefits through the Public Safety Officers' Benefit Program, recently expanded to include officers suffering from traumatic effects they experienced while on duty.

METROPOLITAN POLICE OFFICER JEFFREY SMITH

Metropolitan police officer Jeffrey Smith served for 12 years and died at age 35. He is survived by his widow Erin and his parents.

Officer Smith was assaulted inside the Capitol on January 6th, and struck in the head by a metal pole while clearing the Capitol grounds that night.

On March 7, 2022 his death was officially ruled as in the line of duty, with a finding that the "sole and direct" cause of his death were the injuries he received on January 6th.

METROPOLITAN POLICE OFFICER KYLE DEFREYTAG

Metropolitan police officer Kyle DeFreytag served for 5 years and died at age 26. He is survived by his parents and two siblings.

Officer DeFreytag and fellow officer Gunther Hashida were honored by Virginia Congressman Don Beyer, who said “they, and all of the officers who defended the Capitol and our democracy on January 6, are heroes and deserve our thanks. It is increasingly clear that many of those who put their lives at risk to protect the Capitol that day are still suffering from both physical and mental wounds.”

METROPOLITAN POLICE OFFICER GUNTHER HASHIDA

Metropolitan police officer Gunther Hashida served for 18 years and died at age 43. He is survived by his widow Romelia, three children, a sister and an extended family.

House Speaker Pelosi described officer Hashida as “a hero, who risked his life to save our Capitol, the Congressional community and our very Democracy. ... All Americans are indebted to him for his great valor and patriotism on January 6th and throughout his selfless service. ... May Officer Hashida’s life be an inspiration to all to protect our Country and Democracy.”

Thank you. Please be seated.

CLOSE

Many have suggested January 6th is an event that we should move on from. For those officers who defended the Capitol, January 6th was not just a day - it is every day.

The memories of that day remain raw and visceral for those officers who bore the brunt of physical assaults, whose loyalty and service were questioned with violence, threats and epithets, and who often bear those burdens alone.

We are here to honor those brave and selfless officers who ensured that Congress could fulfill its constitutional duty, and that our nation could withstand one of its gravest threats.

Last Friday, on the second anniversary of January 6th, the President of the United States bestowed the Presidential Citizens Medal, our nation's second highest civilian award, to fourteen persons who performed exemplary deeds or services for their country or fellow citizens.

Nine of the recipients were officers honored for protecting the United States Capitol on January 6th, including six we have recognized today - Caroline Edwards, Brian Sicknick, Aquilino Gonnell, Michael Fanone, Howard Leibengood, and Jeffrey Smith.

As the President said to the honorees, "It's not exaggeration to say America owes you all a debt, a debt of gratitude, one we can never fully repay unless we live up to what you did."

Thank you for honoring these heroic officers along with the citizens of El Dorado County.