

Navy clearance diver humbled by award for courage

By Darlene Blakeley
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The dusty roads of the Pashmul region of southern Afghanistan are a strange place to find a Navy clearance diver from Shearwater, NS.

More used to salt water and cool temperatures, PO1 Paul "Knobby" Walsh found himself instead in the incongruous environment of guns, bullets and armoured personnel carriers.

However, as an elite professional from Fleet Diving Unit (Atlantic) trained in the risky business of underwater bomb disposal, the difference is not as big as you might think. In fact, PO1 Walsh was so effective during his tour of duty from August 2006 to February 2007 that he has just been awarded a Mention in Dispatches from the Governor General of Canada.

Presented to him during a ceremony at the Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Que., on October 11, the citation notes that PO1 Walsh is recognized "for his courage and dedication to duty while deployed as 23 Field Squadron's explosive ordnance disposal chief within the 1st Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, in Afghanistan."

It also states that during Operation MEDUSA in September 2006, he risked his life to assist combat engineers in clearing a section of Route



CWO Gregoire Lacroix (left), The Canadian Forces Chief of Defence Staff, Gen Rick Hillier (right) presents PO1 Paul Joseph Walsh, CD (middle) with a Mentioned in Dispatches Award for his valiant conduct, devotion to duty and distinguished service in combat conditions.

Vancouver in the Pashmul region. "He personally identified five improvised explosive devices and a 450 kg unexploded bomb within a 150-metre stretch of road, and systematically disposed of them. Petty Officer First Class Walsh's profes-

sionalism and commitment to his mission potentially saved the lives of many fellow soldiers."

PO1 Walsh is quick to deflect attention away from himself however, insisting that his "unbelievable" team of 17, three of whom

were also clearance divers (PO2 Jim Leith, MS Scott Elson and LS Keith Bruce), and the rest engineers from 23 Field Squadron, deserve just as much recognition.

"It is very humbling to receive this honour," he said, "but my team

deserves as much credit, if not more. While we were part of Op MEDUSA we lost 26 guys. It took a lot of blood and guts, and I was just a small part of that. Everyone who was involved can hold their heads high—I am accepting this award on behalf of the whole team."

During his six-month tour, PO1 Walsh's team was involved in over 100 improvised explosive devices/explosive ordnance disposal (IED/EOD) events, many of which involved hand-dismantling explosive devices at great personal peril. Part of that included post-blast responses, which involved making the first approach after explosions made by roadside IEDs and suicide bombers to ensure there were no secondary blasts.

Since returning home to his fiancée and young children, PO1 Walsh has been speaking about his tour in Afghanistan to school children. "I tell them that we don't worry too much about politics, we just worry about the job at hand and the guy next to us on the ground. We sleep, eat and fight with each other. We have a commitment to each other that forms an incredible bond."

Mention in Dispatches is a national award created by Her Majesty the Queen in 1992 to recognize valiant conduct, devotion to duty or other distinguished service in combat or near-combat conditions.

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