

Christopher Celiz

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Medal of Honor Recipient

By James G. Fausone

CHRISTOPHER ANDREW CELIZ

MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENT

TRIBE MEMBER OF WARRIORS, RANGERS, JEWS AND AMERICANS



BY JAMES G. FAUSONE



*Christopher Andrew
Celiz*

Everyone belongs to a tribe. We may not think of family, friends, religion, university, country, or professions as tribes, but they are in many ways. [Christopher Andrew Celiz](#) was a member of many tribes and the Army Rangers and the United States of America were at the top of the list. He dedicated his life to protecting his tribes.

U.S. Army Sergeant First Class Christopher Celiz was posthumously awarded the [Medal of Honor](#) in December 2021, for his actions on July 12, 2018, while protecting his tribes.

The Early Years

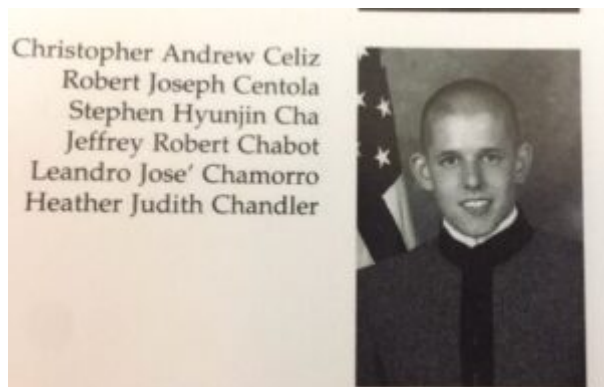
Christopher was born in Summerville, South Carolina in January 1986. The town is small, with about 27,000 residents when he was born. It was a melting pot of races and religions. The 65% white population made it unique in South Carolina. It holds one of the largest and oldest art festivals in South Carolina each spring. The Flowertown Festival was a focal point every year and engaged the students of Summerville High School.

Chris was a charismatic young man whom his teachers at Summerville High remember as always having a smile on his face. He participated in JROTC – according to one of his battle buddies, they would spend weekends together competing at drill meets and hanging out at one another's homes. Another Summerville High School student would win his heart and as high school sweethearts, they would later marry and start a family. It was his good mood and good attitude that teachers would remember about Chris.

A young Summerville co-ed named Katie was working at the same grocery store as Chris

in 2002. She related how they met working at the local Bi-Lo supermarket on Bacons Bridge Road. The Post and Courier captured this story in 2021: *“She noticed that every time she hung her jacket up in the break room it seemed to go missing around closing time. One day, she walked into the parking lot and saw her co-worker, a square-jawed JROTC student named Chris, wearing her coat while he was returning the shopping carts. The following night, her coat was hung up right where she had left it. Inside the pocket were rose petals he had placed there. “The next day was when he actually asked if we’d, like, start hanging out,” she remembered. “Then we really hit it off, and we’ve been together ever since.”*

South Carolina has a high percentage of veterans compared to the national average. With about 10% of the population veterans, it is no surprise a patriot spirit ran thru Christopher Celiz’s veins. In fact, Katie’s father was a Navy veteran and she had a familial understanding of patriotism and service. The JROTC student she was falling for was determined to serve. In the course of a few short years, Katie and Chris graduated high school in 2004. They were both in school at the time of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. That was a formative time for all Americans and patriotism ran strong.



*Christopher Celiz as a Cadet at
The Citadel*

Christopher Celiz went on to The Citadel for two years (2004-2006). The Citadel was only 24 miles and 30 minutes away from Summerville. Nevertheless, it was hard for the young lover to be apart. The Citadel is known for its military bearing, strict discipline, and shaping young boys into men.

Citadel’s Commandants of Cadets, **Colonel Thomas J. Gordon**, United States Marine Corps (Ret.) explains to [Veterans Radio Podcasts in 2022:](#)

"The Citadel's mission is to educate and develop principal leaders that will be successful in all walks of life. Of course, I'm biased but I truly believe that The Citadel is the ultimate leadership lab. You talked about whether leaders are made or if they're born. Well, I think we can all agree that while there are a few naturals out there, most of us have developed our leadership skills through the school of hard knocks. The Citadel offers just that, right? It's an intense, rigorous program but it affords them the opportunity to lead their peers. We have these five leadership laboratories – there are five battalions and the corps cadets are given the opportunity for the corps to run the corps here. I firmly believe that if you can lead your peers, you can lead anybody. We have a remarkable academic program here. It's well-recognized throughout the world. The U.S. News and World Report have ranked it number one in the south for the past 11 years in a row. We've got a great academic program, and a great athletic program but I think what separates The Citadel from your average university is that leadership laboratory – the ability to develop men and women of virtue in character and turn those leaders back to society. I think we can all agree that that's what society needs most right now, is principal leaders – men and women of virtue and character that's kind of been imbued with our core values of honor, duty, and respect. The young men and women who come down here are just absolutely remarkable. They want to challenge themselves, that they want to their mettle against what is perceived to be the most rigorous of all those standards."

U.S. Army Rangers



*Sgt. 1st Class Christopher Celiz
with his family.*

(Photo courtesy of Katie Celiz)

Chris left The Citadel after two years. There can be no doubt that those years shaped him as a man and a leader. When he left in 2007 it was for the purpose of joining the U.S. Army. He married Katie around the same time he signed up.

Christopher Celiz spent the next 11 years in service. During that time, he and Katie

had a daughter and what Katie refers to as a beautiful life. Army life is not an easy life for the servicemember or family. It takes special people to deal with the deployments and training schedules.

Chris had five overseas deployments by the time he was 32. Celiz deployed from 2008 to 2009 in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and from 2011 to 2012 in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Over the first half-decade of service, Celiz would have been moving up in the ranks and looking at different service opportunities. In 2013, Celiz was selected to serve with the 75th Ranger Regiment as a combat engineer. He served with the 1st Battalion as Battalion Master Breacher and engineer and then later as a mortar platoon sergeant with Company D. At the time of his death, Celiz was serving as the battalion mortar platoon sergeant.

A combat engineer supports infantry missions. Not only are combat engineers responsible for the more traditional engineering roles (like aiding the mobility of troops by constructing a bridge), but they're also the ones who are in charge of explosives. These are the soldiers responsible for clearing a route or terrain – often a business most efficiently done with explosives. Demolition, in other words, is just as important to a combat engineer's training as construction.

As Chris moved to battalion mortar platoon sergeant, he was working with a weapon system that is a workhorse for Rangers. Typically, mortar systems provide close-range, quick-response, indirect fire in tactical combat. This is achieved by launching high explosive, smoke, and illumination mortar shells in high-arc trajectories. Mortars have a variety of advantages that over the years have inspired the name "infantryman's artillery."

In his short life, Chris was a member of some powerful tribes. He was a Ranger and a warrior, imprinted by the Citadel and raised in the Jewish faith. Humans are a social species and organizing in tribes meets a lot of those needs. It gives one identity, protection, an inclusive environment, sense of purpose. In the 1970s, a psychologist named Henri Tajfel developed a social identity theory that says that when we define ourselves, we do so in large part by asserting our loyalty to the groups to which we belong. Tribalism has been viewed in history as both a good and bad influence. The 12 tribes of Judaism are mentioned in the Old Testament and in the Quran. Tribes hold you to certain standards of conduct. That conduct may be moral, religious, level of effort, or expectations in the face of adversity.



United States Army Rangers

The 75th Ranger Regiment is the United States Army's iconic light infantry special operations force, also known as the Army Rangers. "Rangers lead the way" has been the Ranger motto for decades. On June 6, 1944, the Rangers took part in one of their most famous missions: D-Day. During the attack on Omaha Beach in Normandy, General Norman Cota of the 29th Infantry Division unintentionally created the ranger motto. While asking Max Schneider, Lieutenant of the 5th Battalion of the 75th Infantry Ranger Regiment, what unit he was a part of, General Cota then stated, "Well goddammit, if you're Rangers, lead the way!" Ever since then, the "Rangers lead the way" motto has remained true. The Rangers are the ultimate tribe.

Valor Leading The Way

On July 12, 2018, as the leader of a special operations unit composed of partnered forces and members of the 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, Celiz led an operation to clear an area of enemy forces and thereby disrupt future attacks against the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Shortly after his team reached their initial objective, a large enemy force attacked. The enemy placed effective fire on him and his team, preventing them from maneuvering to a counterattack. Realizing the danger to his team and the operation, Celiz voluntarily exposed himself to intense enemy machine-gun and small-arms fire.

Under fire, he retrieved and employed a heavy weapon system, thereby allowing U.S. and partnered forces to regain the initiative, maneuver to a secure location, and begin treating a critically wounded partnered force member.

As the medical evacuation helicopter arrived, it was immediately engaged by accurate and sustained enemy fire. Knowing how critical it was to quickly load the wounded partner, Celiz exposed himself again to heavy enemy fire so he could take charge to direct and lead the evacuation. As the casualty was moved from a position of cover, Celiz made a conscious effort to ensure his body acted as a physical shield to protect his team, the injured partner, and the crew of the aircraft from enemy fire. After the wounded partner was loaded, Celiz's team returned to cover, but he remained with the aircraft, returning a high volume of fire and constantly repositioning himself to shield the aircraft and its crew.

With his final reposition, Celiz placed himself directly between the cockpit and the enemy, ensuring the aircraft was able to depart. Upon the helicopter's liftoff, Celiz was hit by enemy fire. Fully aware of his injury, but understanding the peril to the aircraft, Celiz motioned to Captain Ben Krzeczowski to depart rather than remain to load him. His selfless actions saved the life of the evacuated partnered force member and almost certainly prevented further casualties among other members of his team and the aircrew. Celiz died as a result of his injuries.

Recognition In Death

The Savannah South Carolina paper recognized the magnitude of laying a hero from Summerville, SC, to rest in July 2018. The service was held at Congregation Mickve Israel in Savannah, Georgia. It is one of the oldest synagogues in the United States, as it was organized in 1735 by mostly Sephardic Jewish immigrants of Spanish-Portuguese extraction from London who arrived in the new colony in 1733. It was most fitting that such a heroic man benefit from a final service at the oldest synagogue in the country which he fought and died defending.

South Carolina has a population of roughly five million. About 70% of South Carolina's adult population is classified as highly religious, with Christianity being the most popular religion. Protestants are the largest religious group in South Carolina. Other world religions practiced in South Carolina include the Baha'i faith, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Less than 1% of the population is Jewish.

The Post and Courier reported:

"The mourners showed up by the hundreds, silently lining up in front of Congregation Mickve Israel while the sounds of bagpipes filled one of the city's historic squares Wednesday afternoon. And after more than 300 people packed the synagogue for the funeral service, those who couldn't make it inside – soldiers in uniform and civilians – crowded the open doorway and spilled onto the sidewalk. Fellow soldiers with the 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment based at Hunter Army Airfield in Savannah knew Celiz as a dedicated leader whose "infectiously" positive attitude inspired others. Celiz was on his fifth deployment as an Army Ranger when he was killed. After his death, the commander of the 75th Ranger Regiment referred to him as a "national treasure." At Summerville High School and later The Citadel, where Celiz was enrolled for two years before enlisting in the Army in 2007, friends remembered him as smart, caring and upbeat. He was quick to crack a joke to lighten the mood, they said. He seemed to earn the respect and love of everyone who knew him. And to Jennifer Hunter of Summerville, a friend of Celiz and his wife, Katie, it was no surprise that several hundred people attended Wednesday's service. Through birthday parties, holiday celebrations and weekend visits to each other's homes, Hunter got to know Celiz as an "honorable, amazing" father to his 8-year-old daughter." "I've never seen a man love his wife and his child as much as he loved them," she said. Friends said Celiz and his wife began dating in high school and became "inseparable."

Ultimate Recognition

Three years after his death, Christopher Celiz was again in the national spotlight. This time, his family was invited to the White House.



President Joseph R. Biden, Jr., presents the Medal of Honor to Katherine Celiz, spouse of U.S. Army Ranger Sgt. 1st Class Christopher A. Celiz, and their daughter, Shannon, during a ceremony at the White House in Washington, D.C., Dec. 16, 2021. (U.S. Army photo by Laura Buchta)

Chris was recognized for exceeding his tribe's expectations when he was posthumously awarded the [Medal of Honor](#). While no one awarded the Medal of Honor is seeking the limelight, it does seem inappropriate to award multiple medals in a single ceremony. The service member, or his family, should not have to share the attention with anyone on that special day. However, Christopher Celiz was awarded the Medal at the same ceremony that President Biden awarded the Medal of Honor to Sergeant First Class Alwyn C. Cashe, U.S. Army, and Master Sergeant Earl D. Plumlee, U.S. Army.

In December 2021, President Biden said at the ceremony: *"Christopher Celiz was courage made flesh. Today, we add his name to the elite vanguard of American warriors who, generation after generation, have strengthened and inspired our nation with their unwavering bravery and service. His legacy lives on in the lives he saved, the teammates he mentored, and the memories he made with his beloved wife, Katie, and especially – and their precious daughter, Shannon. Thank you for sharing your dad with our country, Shannon. We'll never forget the debt that we owe you and your whole family."*

The citation for Sergeant First Class Christopher Andrew Celiz, United States Army reads:

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty:

Sergeant First Class Christopher A. Celiz distinguished himself by conspicuous gallantry above and beyond the call of duty while engaged with the enemy in Paktia Province, Afghanistan, on July 12th, 2018. As the leader of a special purpose unit composed of partnered forces and members of the 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, Sergeant First Class Celiz led an operation to clear an area of enemy forces and thereby disrupt future attacks against the government of Afghanistan and allied forces. Shortly after his team reached their final objectives, a large enemy force attacked, placed effective fire on him and his team, preventing them from maneuvering to counterattack. Realizing the danger the attack posed to his team and the operation, Sergeant First Class Celiz voluntarily exposed himself to intense enemy machine-gun and small-arms fire to retrieve and employ a heavy weapon system, thereby allowing U.S. and partnered forces to regain the initiative, maneuver to a secure location, and begin treatment of a critically wounded partnered force member. As a medical evacuation helicopter arrived, it was immediately engaged by accurate and sustained enemy fire. Knowing how critical it was to quickly load the casualty, Sergeant First Class Celiz willingly exposed himself to heavy enemy fire to direct and lead the evacuation. As the casualty moved from a position of cover and out into intense enemy fire, Sergeant First Class Celiz made a conscious effort to ensure his body acted as a physical shield to his team carrying the casualty and the crew of the aircraft. As the casualty was loaded and Sergeant First Class Celiz's team returned to cover, he alone remained at the aircraft, returning a high volume of fire and constantly repositioning himself to act as a physical shield to the aircraft and its crew. With his final reposition, Sergeant First Class Celiz placed himself directly between the cockpit and the enemy, ensuring the aircraft was able to depart. As the helicopter lifted off, Sergeant First Class Celiz was hit by enemy fire. Fully aware of his own injury but understanding the peril to the aircraft from the intense enemy machine gun fire, Sergeant First Class Celiz motioned to the aircraft to depart rather than remain behind to load him. His selfless actions saved the life of the evacuated partnered force member and almost certainly prevented further casualties among other members of his team and the aircrew. Throughout the entire engagement, Sergeant First Class Celiz significantly changed the course of battle by repeatedly placing himself in extreme danger to protect his team, defeat the enemy, and it ultimately cost him his life. Sergeant First Class Celiz's extraordinary heroism and selflessness above and beyond the call of duty were in keeping with the highest traditions of military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit, and the United States Army.

Cristopher Celiz made all of his tribes proud of his actions and selflessness. He is an example to Rangers and Citadel members. He became the first person of the Jewish faith to be awarded the Medal of Honor since Vietnam. He joined a select group of 17

other Jewish soldiers to have been awarded the Medal. He was an American with a sense of patriotism and a willingness to put service before self.

Celiz was not the first member of the Jewish faith to receive the Medal of Honor. The STL Jewish Light reports the following Jewish Medal of Honor Recipients:

Civil War	Indian Wars	Haiti	World War I	World War II	Korean War	Vietnam War	War in Afghanistan
Abraham Cohn	Simon Suhler (aka Charles Gardner)	Samuel Gross (aka Marguilies)	Sydney G. Gumpertz	Isadore S. Jachman	Leonard M. Kravitz	Jack H. Jacobs	Christopher Celiz
Leopold Karpeles			Benjamin Kaufman	Ben Salomon	Tibor Rubin	John L. Levitow	
Benjamin Levy			William Sawelson	Raymond Zussman			
David Urbansky			William Shemin				

[The Citadel history and status today | RSS.com](#)

About the Author

*Jim Fausone is a partner with **Legal Help For Veterans, PLLC**, with over twenty years of experience helping veterans apply for service-connected disability benefits and starting their claims, appealing VA decisions, and filing claims for an increased disability rating so veterans can receive a higher level of benefits.*

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