

Jason L. Dunham

Cpl. Jason L. Dunham

Lessons from Marines That Jumped on Grenades

By James G. Fausone

# CORPORAL JASON DUNHAM



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Corporal Jason L. Dunham is [one of two incredible Marines](#) that performed similar acts of heroism that resulted in being awarded the Medal of Honor. Each man has his own story but the lessons learned are very similar. What compels a young Marine to risk

his life by jumping on a grenade to save his buddies? Is it their upbringing before the Marine Corps or is it the training received while in the Corps? After reading about these men, you will ask yourself, could I have done what they did? Was the reaction simply training, instinct, or a higher power?

For action in Iraq in 2004, Corporal Jason Lee Dunham was the first Marine to receive the Medal of Honor since the Vietnam War. For action in 2010 in Afghanistan, [Lance Corporal William Kyle Carpenter](#) was the youngest Marine to ever receive the Medal of Honor. Both made a decision to protect their fellow Marines by jumping on a grenade.

## Corporal Jason Lee Dunham



Corporal Jason  
L. Dunham

Jason Lee Dunham (November 10, 1981 – April 22, 2004) was a Corporal in the United States Marine Corps. He was posthumously awarded the [Medal of Honor](#) in 2007 for his actions while serving with the 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines during the [Iraq War in 2004](#).

While on a patrol in Husaybah, his unit was attacked and he deliberately covered an enemy grenade to save nearby Marines. When it exploded, Dunham was gravely injured and died eight days later. His life and story are short, but the lessons he provides and his life were more than just a short story. He was the kind of young man that the Marine Corps seek out, and one that the Country needs. Those that want to be the best and to be tested.

Jason came from a family of service, both military, and public. His dad, Dan, was an Air Force veteran. His mother, Deb, was a public schoolteacher in Scio, New York. This small hometown of 1,800 people in upstate New York is surrounded by hills and creeks. He played high school basketball and like a lot of young men growing up, would describe himself as an athlete. That is where he learned to test himself, the value of teamwork, the disappointment of losing, and the joy of sharing wins. Jason was a typical young man, full of life, and sometimes mischief. He had a smile that would light up a room and make his high school friends and his fellow Marines feel

good. Jason was a big guy with a big heart. High school graduation led him to joining the Marine Corps in 2000.

During the next four years, he absorbed all that the Corps had to teach about teamwork, sacrifice, and pushing oneself beyond expected limits. By 2004, Dunham was a squad leader in Iraq. In the United States Marine Corps, a rifle squad is usually composed of three fireteams of four Marines each and has a squad leader who is typically a Sergeant or Corporal. This is the building block of leadership in the Corps.

On April 14, 2004, the battalion commander's convoy came under attack near Husaybah, Iraq, and 4th Platoon was dispatched on patrol to investigate. Dunham and his squad intercepted a number of cars spotted near the scene of the attack, which the patrol detained to search for weapons. When the squad approached a white Toyota Land Cruiser and saw AK-47s in the back, the driver exited trying to skirt away. Dunham was closest and engaged the insurgent. Dunham during hand-to-hand combat to subdue the insurgent yelled, "WATCH HIS HANDS!" and then the insurgent dropped a Mills 36M hand grenade. Dunham turned his attention to the grenade while another Marine shot the insurgent dead as he tried to escape.

In a flash, Jason L. Dunham had to react to protect the others. He instantly covered the grenade with his Kevlar helmet seeking to contain the blast. Dunham was severely wounded and two of his squad (William Hampton and Kelly Miller) were also struck by grenade fragments. The helmet was shredded, as was Jason.

Why does someone do that? For decades, young Marines have asked themselves, "What would you do in that situation?" It is idle talk during the downtime of war. Wall Street Journal staff reporter, [Michael M. Phillips wrote in 2004](#) that such a conversation of "What would you do?" involved Dunham: "Early this spring (2004), Cpl. Jason L. Dunham and two other Marines sat in an outpost in Iraq and traded theories on surviving a hand-grenade attack. Second Lt. Brian "Bull" Robinson suggested that if a Marine lay face down on the grenade and held it between his forearms, the ceramic bulletproof plate in his flak vest might be strong enough to protect his vital organs. His arms would shatter, but he might live."

Cpl. Dunham had another idea: A Marine's Kevlar helmet held over the grenade might contain the blast. "I'll bet a Kevlar would stop it," he said, according to Second Lt. Robinson. "No, it'll still mess you up," Staff Sgt. John Ferguson recalls saying. It was a conversation the men would remember vividly a few weeks later when they saw the shredded remains of Cpl. Dunham's helmet, apparently blown apart from the inside by a grenade."

In 2005, Phillips published "The Gift of Valor: A War Story" which told Dunham's life story. The men who Dunham saved would refer to his act as "The Gift" and speak of the need to live their lives in a manner that paid honor to the gift they had been given by Jason's sacrifice.

Corporal Jason Dunham's [Medal of Honor citation](#) reads:

**MEDAL OF HONOR ACTION DATE: January 11, 2007**

**CITATION**

*"For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while serving as a Rifle Squad Leader, 4th Platoon, Company K, Third Battalion, Seventh Marines (Reinforced), Regimental Combat Team 7, First Marine Division (Reinforced), on 14 April 2004, Corporal Dunham's squad was conducting a reconnaissance mission in the town of Karabilah, Iraq, when they heard rocket-propelled grenade and small arms fire erupt approximately two kilometers to the west. Corporal Dunham led his Combined Anti-Armor Team towards the engagement to provide fire support to their Battalion Commander's convoy, which had been ambushed as it was traveling to Camp Husaybah. As Corporal Dunham and his Marines advanced, they quickly began to receive enemy fire. Corporal Dunham ordered his squad to dismount their vehicles and led one of his fire teams on foot several blocks south of the ambushed convoy. Discovering seven Iraqi vehicles in a column attempting to depart, Corporal Dunham and his team stopped the vehicles to search them for weapons. As they approached the vehicles, an insurgent leaped out and attacked Corporal Dunham. Corporal Dunham wrestled the insurgent to the ground and in the ensuing struggle saw the insurgent release a grenade. Corporal Dunham immediately alerted his fellow Marines to the threat. Aware of the imminent danger and without hesitation, Corporal Dunham covered the grenade with his helmet and body, bearing the brunt of the explosion and shielding his Marines from the blast. In an ultimate and selfless act of bravery in which he was mortally wounded, he saved the lives of at least two fellow Marines. By his undaunted courage, intrepid fighting spirit, and unwavering devotion to duty, Corporal Dunham gallantly gave his life for his country, thereby reflecting great credit upon himself and upholding the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service."*

[Cpl. Jason L. Dunham](#) was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor by President George W. Bush on January 11, 2007, the first Marine to receive the nation's highest honor for valor in combat since the [Vietnam War](#).





President George W. Bush presents the Medal of Honor to the family of Corporal Jason L. Dunham, U.S. Marine Corps, during a ceremony at the White House on January 11, 2007.

His parents, Dan and Deb, accepted the Medal from President Bush in the East Room of the White House. They raised this young man who would sacrifice his life for their buddies. Dan and Deb may have found comfort in the Christian bible verse – John 15:13: “Greater love hath no man that this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

Their faith would also strengthen them in 2004 when the family made the decision to pull the plug on the ventilator that was keeping Jason alive. He had discussed with his dad that if something happened, he did not want to be kept alive by machines. Jason wrote his living will to indicate that his dad should make the decision and pull the plug.

Jason’s story has continued to inspire because he didn’t hesitate to cover that grenade and shield his fellow Marines from the brunt of the blast.

His mother, [Deb, wrote of her son and her loss in 2007:](#)

#### *MY SON’S GONE – BUT HEROES FIGHT ON*

*“I’ll leave it to others to debate the politics of the war in Iraq. I’m a mother, not a politician. For me, discussing my son is personal, not political.*

*I want to remember Jason and to offer some thoughts to other parents whose sons and daughters are in combat serving this country.*

*There were so many facets to Jason's personality, you can't lock into any one thing.*

*He had a mischievous sparkle in his eye. You could play a joke on him and he would roll with it, but you could be pretty sure that he would come back with something when you weren't expecting it.*

*He was competitive and sports were often the way that he channeled that spirit. Jay played soccer, basketball and baseball – he still holds his high school's record in baseball.*

*Jason's teams often won. When he won, he wouldn't make the other team feel bad. He would congratulate his teammates and then go shake hands with the other team.*

*But it was his quiet sense of kindness that I remember most. He would always want to help out the little guy, the underdog, even when he was young.*

*Jason received the Medal of Honor for sacrificing himself to save others. What he did is great. But my son would have said, "Oo-rah! Let's go have a beer."*

*There was always one more challenge for him to find and meet in his life.*

*Like many families across America, my husband Dan and I would not have been able to afford college for our four children. Jason knew that and in the summer of his junior year in high school, we would sit in the living room and talk about what he wanted to do.*

*My husband was in the Air Force and he believes that everyone should serve a few years in the military, because it polishes you.*

*So Jay went into the Marine Corps – because it's the toughest training and something he could hold over his father's head. He'd say, "I work in the men's department of the military."*

*Jason joined the Corps before 9/11, but he believed in what he was doing in Iraq. His sense of right and wrong was keen. He thought that when someone has a lot of power and a lot of strength, you have a responsibility to help the little brother.*

*I just miss him.*

*For those parents who still have children in Iraq, I say, support your child.*

*This is a volunteer military that we have – these men and women have more courage, more dignity and more patriotism than I have seen in years.*

*Take the phone calls, send the letters and the care packages. They know you are scared, but they don't need to go through two types of war.*

*It's not a political issue when it's your child. They are doing what they believe is right.*

*Jason may be gone, but we've gained thousands of new sons."*

The Dunhams raised a son of strong timber – an American son. He was up to the challenge. He was an example for his siblings and his squad. He cut his life short to give others *"The Gift."*

Sacrifice often leads to struggle. Dunham's sacrifice leads to a struggle for his squad members who are learning to live with the gift of life that he gave them and of which they may not feel worthy. Dunham's family has had to struggle with his loss and its meaning.

These men – [Cpl. Jason L. Dunham](#) and [LCpl. William Kyle Carpenter](#) – who cuddled a grenade, acted in a way that is beyond belief. Such acts of valor often come with the cost of life. On occasion, the men survive and have to live with the resulting scars and struggles. They remind us of the importance of family and foundational values. We can learn from them both in their acts of heroism but also in putting the pieces of life back together.

### **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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[World War I](#)

[Civil War](#)

[Spanish American War](#)

[Mexican-American War](#)

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