



Medal of Valor honors S.C. law enforcement's bravest

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It's something folks might often take for granted, and understandably so.

After all, we live in a modern society and pay our taxes, and therefore we fully expect the traffic lights to work and the firetrucks to respond when we need them to.

But how often do we really stop and think of the sometimes life-threatening circumstances behind those expectations when it comes to our law enforcement officers?

Fortunately, there's an organization that helps us do just that – the S.C. Law Enforcement Officers Association.

Created in 1941, the Law Enforcement Officers Association is a nonprofit professional group with about 7,200 members across South Carolina representing virtually every rank at the municipal, county, state and federal levels.

The association, which is open to all criminal justice professionals in the state, advocates for its members through a variety of activities. Those include legislative initiatives, training programs, networking opportunities and other services.

Each year, its members gather for an awards ceremony in which the Law Enforcement Officers Association recognizes those in its ranks who've performed above and beyond the call of duty.

One of those annual distinctions is its Medal of Valor Award, which this year was presented to three officers with the Aiken Department of Public Safety – Martin Sawyer, Craig Burgess and Steve Miano.

The three were recognized, along with other award winners from the association, during the group's annual conference in mid-November.

On its website, the Law Enforcement Officers Association says its Medal of Valor Award honors "an act of outstanding bravery performed in the line of duty at imminent personal hazard to life under circumstances demonstrating a disregard of personal consequences."

The three Aiken officers certainly fit that description.

On the morning of May 17, they responded to a domestic disturbance 911 call from a home. During the emergency call, dispatchers heard a woman say a man had a gun.

Shots were fired, and the line then fell silent.

Multiple officers rushed to the scene and established a perimeter around the residence, then tried to make contact with the occupants.

After the officer in charge at the scene, David Savage, decided that entry to the home was necessary, officers Sawyer, Burgess and Miano volunteered for the dangerous assignment.

As they entered the home, a man who was lying on the floor several feet away fired a gun at them. A single ballistic shield they were carrying was all that protected the three officers, who returned fire and killed the suspect.

He was lying next to his deceased ex-wife when he shot at the three officers.

This was a tragic incident – another senseless domestic homicide in an all-too-frequent pattern of South Carolinians killing their intimate partners. Every year similar victims of domestic homicide are remembered in a Silent Witness State House ceremony organized by the S.C. Attorney General's Office.

This case, however, could have been far more terrible, as the three Aiken officers escaped harm and their actions prevented injuries to other officers.

For their bravery, the S.C. Law Enforcement Officers Association conferred on them its 2012 Medal of Valor Award.

Aiken City Council also honored the three officers recently in a special presentation.

This is tremendously meaningful not only to officers Sawyer, Burgess and Miano, but also to the larger law enforcement community in Aiken, and the Aiken community as a whole.

Twice in the past year, Aiken's Department of Public Safety has laid to rest one of its own who was killed in the line of duty.

Officer Sandra Rogers, a 27-year veteran of the department and lifelong Aiken County resident, was shot and killed in January while responding to a call about a suspicious vehicle.

And in December 2011, Officer Scott Richardson was shot and killed after he and another officer stopped a suspicious vehicle.

Richardson left behind a wife and three young sons.

We owe officers Rogers and Richardson and their families our deepest gratitude, for they made the ultimate sacrifice in performing their duty as guardians of the public safety.

And, in congratulating officers Sawyer, Burgess and Miano on their Medal of Valor Awards, let's join them in remembering all of their fallen brothers and sisters – not only in our local communities, but in cities and towns across our nation.