

MONROE COUNTY SGT. JOSEPH HIGHAM

Taking a risk to save someone else's life is an unselfish act of bravery under any circumstances. When an officer risks death to save an emotionally distressed man who is intoxicated, wielding a deadly weapon, threatening others, and intent on taking his own life it is an act of extraordinary courage that deserves the highest honor.

Sergeant Joseph Higham of the Monroe County Sheriff's Department was supervisor of the night shift on Sept. 22 when patrol deputies were dispatched just before 2 a.m. to a Bedford Township residence at which trouble had been reported. Moments after those officers, Deputies Scott Hedger and Darlene Redmond, reached the location they described the extremely dangerous situation that was unfolding there.

The details they relayed to Higham were ominous: An obviously inebriated man was seated at a picnic table on the rear deck of his in-laws' home, holding a long gun in one hand and a beer can in the other. Highly agitated and directing extreme hostility toward the deputies, he apparently was on the verge of committing suicide and prepared to shoot anyone who might try to intervene.

The potential for a tragic outcome was chillingly underscored when Deputy Hedger attempted to verbally connect with the subject in order to establish rapport. The man stuck the rifle barrel under his chin and placed a finger on the trigger, a grimly explicit warning for officers to maintain their distance. Over the next few minutes he revealed that he'd had a highly emotional dispute with his wife the previous day at the family's apartment near Toledo, Ohio, and had been arrested for domestic assault. After being released he had discovered that his wife and children were gone. He had come to her parents' home after learning that his wife and 7-year-old son were here.

The subject abruptly ended this brief exchange by stating that he would shoot himself if his wife did not come outside and talk to him. He was unaware that while he'd been distracted by Hedger deputies had evacuated her and their son from the house. His ultimatum further escalated the pressure level in what already was an high-tension standoff.

Sgt. Higham arrived within minutes and took charge of the situation, which he immediately assessed as exceedingly volatile and on the brink of further deteriorating. He activated the department's Special Response Team, of which he is a highly-trained veteran member. Once this unit was deployed he set out on a course of action that was comparable to crossing a minefield in order to reach and defuse a ticking bomb. One misstep, a single

miscalculation, and at least one life would likely be lost – quite possibly his own.

Sgt. Higham began in conventional form, by seeking to engage the intoxicated, armed, self-destructive and highly unpredictable subject in conversation. However, there was nothing conventional about the way he chose to do so. Because of the subject's location and its distance from his own position, Sgt. Higham left cover to begin negotiating in an open setting that seemed more personal and less confrontational. This action went against the grain of both his professional training and natural self-protective instincts. More plainly stated, he took an enormous gamble based on his professional judgment that this approach was more likely to save the subject from destroying himself.

It was only the first step across the minefield, and far from the last.

Sgt. Higham was able to keep negotiations going for more than two hours. He was out in the open the entire time, vulnerable to the erratic impulses of an inebriated and anguished man with a loaded rifle. Throughout this agonizingly deliberate and delicate process he was edging toward the subject, closing the space between them inch-by-inch. Meanwhile, every single step and every spoken word had the potential to unwittingly set off the virtual bomb.

Fortunately, no such explosion had occurred by the time Sgt. Higham was at last able to close within an arms' length of the subject. Unfortunately, the lengthy negotiations were going nowhere in terms of defusing the danger, and the distraught man was becoming even more despondent. The window of opportunity for avoiding a tragedy was closing.

Sgt. Higham had moved near enough to take quick action, but would a moment come that would offer a good chance for success? Time was running out and there certainly was no guarantee. All he could do was wait for whatever came first -- a glimmer of opportunity or until he had no choice except to immediately make a move regardless the odds.

When the subject, who was still holding the rifle barrel under his chin, brought a cigarette to his mouth Sgt. Higham in one quick motion grabbed the weapon and diverted its aim a fraction of a second before the man pulled the trigger. The shocking roar of the discharge proved beyond doubt just how close tragedy had been. Special Response Team officers instantaneously swarmed the man and secured the rifle.

Sgt. Joseph Higham, you showed extraordinary valor by risking your life to save an extremely distressed armed man from taking his own and possibly harming others. Because of your great courage, your dedication to protecting life, and your outstanding professional judgment in complex and perilous

circumstances, the POAM is proud to honor you with our 2013 Police Officer of the Year Award.

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