

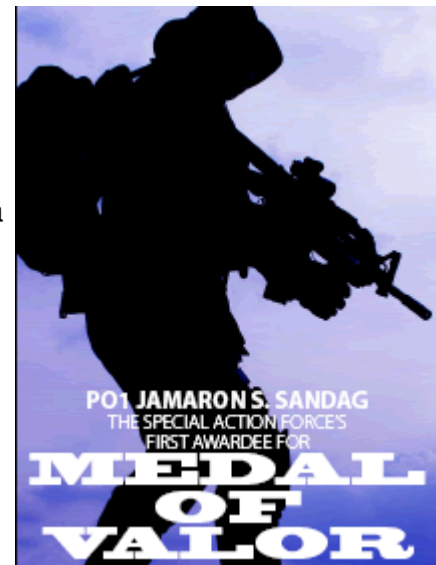
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Medal of Valor by MARYANNE MOLL

The PNP Special Action Force, by definition an elite force, is essentially faceless since it deals with some of the most difficult operations connected with national security, and SAF Troopers, as operatives, have to stay incognito. But every once in a while, a SAF Trooper emerges from the shadows and into the limelight because of exceptional bravery and selfless sacrifice that is beyond the call of duty, and against all odds, succeeds by sheer grit of the SAF spirit.

PO1 Jamaron S. Sandag, all of thirty years old, is the very first SAF Trooper to be awarded the Medal of Valor, the highest decoration for bravery the Philippine National Police can bestow on its uniformed personnel. How PO1 Sandag got there, however, is an fitting example of the ironic twists and the flashes of serendipity that seem to beset the entire history of the SAF. He grew up idolizing his father, who commanded a Civilian Home Defense Force unit in Zamboanga. Members of the Sama tribe of the province, PO1 Sandag and his father were one in believing that the tradition of being a policeman should be honored so that there will always be someone protecting their family. Sandag Senior was a particularly fierce warrior himself, killing one commander of the rebel Moro National Liberation Front during one of their anti-insurgency operations. To avenge the death of this rebel commander, in 1990 his relatives filed a murder case against the younger Sandag, who was then 13, upon the instigation of a rival family. Still, his father was his inspiration, so he did not let the murder charges affect his dream of becoming a policeman. Powered by his father's words that he himself will become a policeman, and by the knowledge that they did not commit any crime, PO1 Sandag was able to earn a degree in Criminology in Zamboanga City in 1998, and moved to Manila in search of his dream. He did odd jobs, including working as a security guard in Greenhills for six months, before landing a job as a janitor in the SAF. Humble and nondescript, he nevertheless had a powerful driving force, for in 2002 he passed the criminology board, and then promptly joined the SAF and underwent the rigorous six-month Commando training. It was only when PO1 Sandag was already a Commando-trained SAF Trooper when the warrant for his arrest came out early in 2003, and he was detained at the Siocon police station for months, not certain what was to become of the case, only too certain that it could drag on and on without resolution. After four months, the complainant in the murder case filed an affidavit of desistance and the charges against PO1 were dropped. In what is an almost too predictably turn of events, the order for his release took almost just as long as his detention. He was still waiting for this order in May when 150- odd heavily armed members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the dreaded Abu Sayyaf attacked Siocon, first attacking the mayor's office with rocket-propelled grenades and strafing the town's public market.

Here now comes the stuff of legend, where dire circumstances serve to separate the brave from the weak, the Commandotrained from the greenhorn. As the rebels barged into the police station with the intent to kill all policemen inside and burn down the structure, PO1 Sandag was in his cell, unable to move to even defend himself from the shower of fire. When a



wounded policeman crawled near him, PO1 Sandag called out and offered to help. As soon as he was let out of his cell, the SAF Trooper grabbed an M16 rifle and opened fire on the attacking rebels inside the station, wounding two of them. Not stopping there, he ran outside to fire at the other rebels acting as lookouts. Grabbing another rifle and having with him more than thirty loaded magazines, and with the instinctive fighting skill of the Commando-trained warrior, he moved from one place to another while firing at them, successfully evading enemy fire, helping the other remaining policemen in the station to hold their ground. Even after he was grazed in the head by a bullet, PO1 Sandag fought on until reinforcements came, which eventually served to drive away the rebels.

The attack in Siocon left a horrible sight. Twenty-five people dead, including six policemen and ten unidentified MILF guerillas, and there was much damage to public and private property. Yet the Siocon police station and its surrounding area were left intact. Most of the policemen left alive in the police station were rendered unable to fight because of gunshot wounds, but PO1 Sandag, the Commando warrior, held the fort with the other remaining policemen, when it was already beyond his call of duty. Beyond the skill of the Commando tactician and strategist, he had the virtue of the SAF Trooper. This incident is a fitting tribute to the kind of warrior that the SAF's Commando course can create. Beleaguered and almost beaten by murder charges for a crime he did not commit, he did not lose faith in his country, decided to serve it nevertheless by becoming a law enforcer, and went on to become one of the most admired policemen in the country. The citation for the Medal of Valor award read: "Although a detainee at the said police station, PO1 Sandag selflessly fought with resolve the tough aggressors, using the M16 rifle of a wounded co-policeman in defending the said station. With his absolute determination and remarkable intrepidity, PO1 Sandag not only bewildered and confused the enemy but also disrupted their plans, specifically the burning of the Siocon Municipal Police Station. By bravely standing his ground and refusing to give up until the arrival of reinforcements, PO1 Sandag and other defenders repulsed enemy attack, saving Siocon from falling into the hands of the attackers." Aside from the elusive medal, PO1 Sandag also received additional rewards for himself and his family, which will help ensure their financial comfort in the years to come.

If not for the murder charges, and if not for the all too predictable delay in the issue of the order for his release after the charges were dropped, PO1 Sandag would not have been in the Siocon police station to help save it from the massive rebel attack. In one of the ironic twists that pepper the history of the SAF, PO1 Sandag had to unknowingly sacrifice several months in detention before the unseen hand of fate would redeem him. With the characteristic humility of the SAF Trooper, he simply hopes that his award will help show the rest of the country that there are still many policemen who remain dedicated to their duty and would risk their lives to protect innocent civilians. The strength of his character, formed by the guidance of his father long before he joined the SAF, only served to enhance the skill that he acquired as a Commando graduate after he joined the SAF. In PO1 Jamaron S. Sandag, SAF Trooper, warrior extraordinaire, there exists not just the honor of being decorated with the Medal of Valor, but the shining example of that legendary union of skill and virtue.