

On 27 Sep 2006, the Association of Graduates presented the first annual Alexander R. Nininger Award for Valor at Arms to MAJ Ryan L. Worthan '97 during a special dinner with the Corps of Cadets in Washington Hall.

In addition to recognizing the recipient for his bravery as an individual, the Association of Graduates regards him as this year's representative of all West Point-commissioned officers who have heroically led soldiers in combat.



## The Association of Graduates

# Alexander R. Nininger Award

### FOR VALOR AT ARMS

By JIM JOHNSTON '73

#### SELECTED BY THE ASSOCIATION

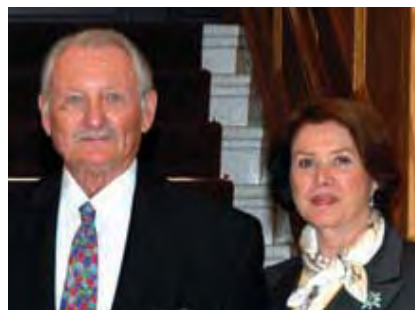
in cooperation with the Academy, MAJ Worthan was, in particular, recognized for his "conspicuous valor" during a twelve-hour battle near Firebase Shkin, about seven kilometers from the Pakistani border. During welcome remarks, Superintendent LTG Buster Hagenbeck '71, who had commanded in Afghanistan, described the region as some of the most inhospitable terrain in the world, noting the region's extreme variations in temperature, its compartmentalized features, and its infestation with a brutal enemy.

On the morning of 29 Sep 2003, then-CPT Worthan's unit, A Company of the 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry, 10th Mountain Division, came under attack. In the early morning hours, enemy forces attacked one of Worthan's platoons, wounding three soldiers. Worthan deployed with another platoon from the firebase to assist. The two

platoons continued to fight, and Apache attack helicopters provided fire support. Later, two A-10 Warthogs and a third platoon of A Company soldiers joined the battle. When a medical evacuation helicopter attempted to land, it was fired upon from another ridgeline, and the intensity of the battle increased. Eventually, the insurgents were repelled and pursued toward the Pakistani border by Worthan's elements. After twelve hours of combat, Worthan's higher headquarters ordered him to break contact with the enemy.

In his remarks to the Corps, AOG Chairman LTG Stroup '62 explained that the Association had named its award for valor in honor of 2LT Alexander R. "Sandy" Nininger '41, the first member of the Army to be awarded the Medal of Honor in WWII. On 12 Jan 1942, Nininger voluntarily attached himself to another company in his Philippine Scouts regiment that was under

heavy attack near Abucay, Bataan. When enemy fire stalled a counterattack attempting to regain lost positions, Nininger attacked and destroyed several enemy positions. Wounded several times, he continued to advance until he was killed. Following his example, the soldiers rallied and recaptured their lost positions.



Mr. Doug Kenna '45 developed the concept for the Nininger Award, and he and his wife Jean have generously endowed the award's annual presentation.



Opposite: First Captain Jon Nielsen applauds as MAJ Worthan holds the autographed rugby ball from the team aloft and the cadet bust presented by the Corps. Above: MAJ Worthan at a reception at Herbert Hall with his wife Amy, brother Gabe, and parents, Jane and Gary Worthan.

Following LTG Stroup's presentation of the Nininger medallion, Worthan, an Infantry officer currently assigned to the Ranger Training Brigade, addressed the Corps of Cadets, emphasizing how honored and humbled he was by his selection for the award and asking the Corps of Cadets to give thought to all of the heroes in the Long Gray Line and to the West Point graduates and their soldiers who currently are fighting in extremely harsh conditions against a vicious, determined enemy. He went on to summarize a few vignettes from the battle at Shkin.

In particular, he cited the battle leadership of 2LT Thompson, SFC Gannaway, and his second platoon, which had been attacked at 0554 and fought until well after dark. In spite of multiple casualties, they fought "in extremely difficult terrain, but they never faltered, killing numerous enemy combatants." MAJ Worthan also mentioned the battle leadership of ILT Craig Mullaney '00, a Rhodes Scholar who "initially was located in a support-by-fire position, where I had positioned him, separated from a portion of his platoon. He fought his way into position and led his platoon, from the front, with distinction."

MAJ Worthan became visibly emotional when recounting the heroism of PFC Evan O'Neill: "walking second in Mullaney's platoon, [he] was wounded and pinned down in a well-constructed, complex enemy ambush, but he continued to return fire while a sniper shot him three more times. His last question to his team leader, SGT Alan Grenz, was simply, "Is everybody else OK?" PFC O'Neill was posthumously awarded a Bronze Star for Valor and the Purple Heart. SGT Grenz, after assaulting the enemy ambush line, realized he was missing PFC O'Neill. He returned to the kill zone, recovered O'Neill, and fought heroically for six more hours. He received the Silver Star and the Purple Heart."



Superintendent LTG Hagenbeck, Mr. Doug Kenna, MAJ Worthan, and Commandant BG Caslen at Herbert Hall.

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In a final vignette, Worthan recalled CWO Bull Woodard and his two Apache helicopter crews, who continued to mark enemy positions for engagement by close air support long after their Apaches had suffered major battle damage.

In closing, Worthan pointed out the value of basic lessons learned at West Point, offering his belief that he often relies on fundamentals he learned at West Point as a cadet. A former captain of the Army Rugby team, he also told the cadets about the heart it takes to win at games like rugby and that the teamwork and determination displayed by their teammates here is similar to the heart his soldiers have shown in battle.

The special evening in the Cadet Mess concluded with short remarks by the Commandant, who voiced his appreciation for Worthan's service and his taking time from training Rangers to return to West Point. BG Caslen '75 also pointed out that the Nininger Award for Valor at Arms is a fitting complement to the Junior Leader Panel Activities taking place under the direction of the Department of Military Instruction. The rousing standing ovation given to MAJ Worthan by the Corps was preceded by the

First Captain and Army Rugby Co-Captains presentation of gifts from the Corps in appreciation.

The Nininger Award is the Association's third major award, joining the Thayer Award and the Distinguished Graduate Award, both of which honor individuals for lifetime service consistent with the ideals of West Point. Mr. Doug Kenna '45 developed the concept for the Nininger Award, and he and his wife Jean have generously endowed the award's annual presentation. Kenna viewed this award as recognizing graduates who recently had been cited for heroism in battle. Objectives of the award program are to present the Corps of Cadets with an exemplar of heroism who has been cited for gallantry in an action similar to those junior officers are likely to face in the immediate future. It also was important to Kenna, as well as to the AOG and the Academy, that the awardee be willing and able to return to West Point to receive the award and address the Corps of Cadets. Both the Superintendent and AOG Chairman LTG Ted Stroup, noted that history will deem MAJ Worthan a very fitting recipient of the inaugural Nininger Award for Valor at Arms.