

Amid family loss, Marine earns honor

Iowan Gerald Kasal, who died Sunday, had been looking forward to seeing his son, Brad, receive the Navy Cross today by video conference.

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One of Gerald Kasal's final wishes was to live long enough to see his son receive the Navy Cross, one of the nation's highest military awards.

He almost made it.

Kasal, 69, a retired Afton-area farmer, died Sunday morning after a battle with liver cancer.

His condition had gradually deteriorated, making him too ill to travel to Camp Pendleton, Calif., where his son, Brad, will be decorated today for combat heroism in Iraq and promoted to sergeant major in the Marine Corps.



MARY CHIND/REGISTER FILE PHOTO

Marine 1st Sgt. Brad Kasal of Afton gets a bit choked up after thanking members of the Senate in February for passing a resolution in his honor. Kasal was wounded in Iraq while helping to rescue fellow Marines inside an insurgent-controlled house. Behind him is his mother Myrna and father Gerald.

Volunteers had worked hard in recent days to set up a live video conference hookup at Southwestern Community College in Creston, where the elder Kasal (pronounced "castle") had hoped to gather with family and friends to watch the ceremony. Despite his death, the event is expected to go on as planned with participants paying their respects to Gerald Kasal while honoring his son.

Funeral arrangements are being handled by the Powers Funeral Home of Creston.

The elder Kasal had sold his farm recently because of his failing health and had moved to Creston. Graveside services are planned for 11:30 a.m. Thursday at National Cemetery in Vining, Ia.

Brad Kasal, 39, joined the Marines after graduating from East Union High School in 1984.

He was shot seven times on Nov. 13, 2004, while leading a mission to rescue three wounded Marines in an insurgent-held house in Fallujah, Iraq.

Moments later, he suffered more than 40 shrapnel wounds after he bear-hugged a fellow Marine to protect him from a grenade explosion.

He killed an insurgent inside the house in an exchange of gunfire at point-blank range.

Reports had been circulating for the past year that the Iowan might be a candidate for the Medal of Honor - the nation's highest military award. Instead, Kasal will be awarded the Navy Cross, the second-highest ranking medal for Marines. He is one of only 10 Marines awarded the Navy Cross for heroism in Iraq or Afghanistan, military officials said.

"It is a great honor. I am very humbled by it," Kasal said in an interview last week. "Just the fact that I would be considered for it is very humbling."

In a sense, he said, it was a relief not to win the Medal of Honor because such an award would have brought even more attention to him.

His heroics in Iraq gained Kasal near legendary status after a photo of him, bloodied and holding a 9 mm handgun as he was helped by two fellow Marines, was circulated on dozens of Internet sites.

He was honored in February by the Iowa House and Senate, which gave him standing ovations, after unanimously passing resolutions in each chamber citing him for patriotic and courageous service.

Both his ailing father - who was in a wheelchair - and his mother, Myrna Kasal, were at his side during the salutes.

The live video links today between Iowa and Camp Pendleton are being coordinated by Dick Bartlett, a Dyersville native who now lives in Oceanside, Calif.

Bartlett is a volunteer for the Freedom Calls Foundation, which was assisted in arranging the video hookups by community college officials, the Iowa Communications Network, Cox Business Services and the Marines.

Today's ceremony will be attended in California by hundreds of Kasal's fellow Marines. Maj. Gen. Michael Lehnert, commander of Marine Corps installations on the West Coast, will present the award.

Kasal suffered such serious injuries to his right leg in Iraq that doctors recommended months afterward that he undergo amputation. But the Marine stubbornly rejected that advice and has worked hard at rehabilitation.

Kasal has received orders to be transferred later this month to Des Moines, where he will be a key figure in Marine recruiting in a five-state area. Eventually, he said, he hopes to return to combat status with a Marine unit.