



The NCOA Navy Vanguard Award is presented in honor and memory of Medal of Honor recipient Machinist Mate First Class Robert R. Scott.

The 2020 NCOA Military Vanguard recipient for the U.S. Navy is Special Operator First Class Mark T. Palmer.

On 26 May 2019, SO1 Palmer traveled to Atlantic Beach, North Carolina near Pine Knoll Shores. Prior to traveling to Atlantic Beach, SO1 Palmer's family discussed the dangers of rip currents and the specific risk of the Atlantic Beach. Between 19 April and 26 May 2019, six people had drowned at Atlantic Beach, more than in all of 2018.

Upon arriving at the beach at approximately 1430, SO1 Palmer noticed a group of seven (five children and two adult males) in the vicinity of his own family

on the beach. All five children were playing in knee deep water near crashing waves. Three of the five boys rushed towards an oncoming wave and surfaced on the backside of the wave thus putting them in water too deep for them to stand and in a rip current which quickly carried them past the surf zone and 50 meters out to sea. SO1 Palmer witnessed the father of the three children, Mr. Ernest Foster Jr., immediately rush into the water after identifying that his children were struggling to stay afloat. SO1 Palmer entered the water to investigate because he was unsure as to whether the group of four were drowning or not. After swimming approximately 25 meters, SO1 Palmer heard Mr. Foster screaming for help. It was at this point that SO1 Palmer understood the severity of the situation. With clarity of thought and disregard for his own personal safety, SO1 Palmer called back to his family and instructed them to call emergency services while he continued swimming to assist Mr. Foster in rescuing his children.

SO1 Palmer swam over 100 meters through dangerous waters and a current assessed at two to three knots to reach Mr. Foster and two of the children. Mr. Foster was desperately attempting to push his two children up and keep them afloat, causing himself to go under while the third and youngest child was still being swept out to sea. SO1 Palmer quickly identified that all individuals were exhibiting signs of drowning and beginning to succumb to exhaustion. All four individuals were swallowing water, gasping for air and exhibiting skin discoloration associated with oxygen deprivation. SO1 Palmer described Mr. Foster as "fighting with every ounce of strength and courage possible to keep two of the boys above the water, at the cost of his own life." Mr. Foster leaved with SO1 Palmer to save the third child.

Arriving just in time, SO1 Palmer, a trained medic, identified that the five-year-old child was hypoxic and conscious but limp in the water. Feeling the mounting fatigue of the rescue and unsure of how extensive the rip current was, SO1 Palmer fell back upon his training and quickly put the child into a rescue position. He then swam for 10 minutes and 200 meters parallel to the shore in order to escape the rip current, unsure of how far he would need to swim or if he would be able to return safely to shore. Upon feeling the current shift and push him towards shore, SO1 Palmer continued swimming the child another 100 meters into the beach.

Exhausted and now fully conscious of the dangers the rip current posed, SO1 Palmer unhesitatingly risked his life yet again, returned to the surf zone, and swam directly for the remaining victims who had drifted a further 100 meters out to sea, still trapped in the rip current. As SO1 Palmer swam over 300 meters over the course of 10 minutes, he lost sight of Mr. Foster. When SO1 Palmer reached the remaining two children, he asked where their father was and they replied simply that he was "gone." The two children were clinging to a flotation device to remain afloat. As SO1 Palmer assisted the nine and ten year old children, he briefly saw Mr. Foster beneath the waves approximately 20 meters away, but SO1 Palmer was unable to pinpoint his location. At this time, emergency services personnel arrived on jet skis, and SO1 Palmer instructed them that there was still an individual unaccounted for and directed them to rescue him. SO1 Palmer then swam the remaining two children to shore.

On several separate occasions and over the course of approximately 30 minutes, SO1 Palmer risked his life to save three children and attempted to save their father. SO1 Palmer courageously navigated over 1000 meters of treacherous waters alone and single-handedly saved the lives of three drowning children. Of the more than 100 bystanders watching on the beach, only SO1 Palmer risked his life to render aid to a family in desperate need of assistance.

Special Operator First Class Mark T. Palmer's quick thinking, exceptional bravery, and selfless actions reflects great credit upon himself and upholds the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.