

Massena Native Awarded For Bravery

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MASSENA — A former Massena resident was recently presented the highest award for valor offered by the Immigration and Naturalization Service for a death-defying act of bravery.

Senior Border Patrol Agent Michael J. Deshaies now calls Mobile, Ala., home, but the son of Mr. and Mrs. John Deshaies was on duty in Pensacola, Fla. when the incident that garnered him the coveted Newton-Azrak award occurred.

It was Feb. 18, 1993, Deshaies recalled this week from his Alabama home, and the air temperature was about 18 degrees Fahrenheit.

"That's about as cold as it gets in our area," he said. "It was rather chilly."

"It was a construction site, and there were some obvious illegal aliens and some of them fled," he continued, across a drainage canal. But one of the aliens disappeared below the surface.

"He made it about halfway across, and I could tell he wasn't going to make it," he said. "The water was very muddy. He went under, and he didn't come back up. The guy had been struggling."

Deshaies threw off his glasses, un belt and winter coat and jumped in the water and swam out to where he'd last seen the fleeing alien.



DESHAIES HONORED — Massena native and U.S. Border Patrol agent Michael Deshaies, left, was recently awarded the prestigious Newton-Azrak Award for valor after risking his life to rescue a fleeing alien. Deshaies received the award from Immigration and Naturalization Service Commissioner Doris Meissner. (Photo Provided)

"I grabbed his arm and I brought him up," he said. "He was right on the verge of being unconscious. I got him to the other side, and it wasn't a pretty sight."

"I really didn't want to jump in. But it's one of those things. It's more or less a reflex action," he added.

The fleeing alien — whom Deshaies' resuscitated after the rescue

— was incarcerated and later shipped back to Mexico.

But Deshaies' superiors recognized his actions as more than just a reflex, calling the rescue "an act of unparalleled bravery and heroism."

The commissioner of the INS recently presented Deshaies the Newton-Azrak award in Baltimore. The award is named in honor of two

young border patrol officers who were kidnapped and murdered by smugglers in 1967.

"Unselfish acts performed at risk of paying the supreme sacrifice deserve recognition of the highest order," said Jesse F. Tabor, the chief patrol agent of Deshaies' sector.

Deshaies said he was very honored by the recognition. "They gave me a heck of an award," he said. The bronze statue of a border patrol agent stands two feet in height and is prominently displayed in his home.

Deshaies admitted it's a long road from Massena to Mobile, Ala. "I joined the border patrol in March of 1983," he recalled. After being hired he was immediately sent to El Paso, Texas, where he served for five years. All the starting border patrol officers put in time along the Mexican border, he explained.

"That's where everybody starts out and that's where all the action is," he said. "Nobody really starts on those northern stations or the Gulf Coast. (El Paso) where they're needed, as opposed to say Ogdensburg or Massena. They don't have the volume."

In his current duties, Deshaies and the agents in his Mobile, Ala. office cover the whole state of Alabama and the Florida panhandle. "We have a large geographical area," he said.

"Mobile's an international sea-

port, so sometimes we get shipjumpers and stowaways. And Route 10 from Texas to Florida is a major thoroughfare."

Deshaies added foreign students attending American schools lose their legal residency status when they drop out of school or have failing grades and his office also deals with those matters.

Deshaies, a 1968 graduate of Holy Family High School and a 1972 graduate of St. John Fisher College in Rochester, is married to the former Martha Brown, also of Massena.

They have a son who's now attending Auburn University. He said they get back to Massena every other year. Last summer he attended his 25th high school class reunion here.

His family has lived in Mobile, Ala. for six years now, and he said he does prefer the warm climate of his present home to the subarctic temperatures sometimes prevalent in Massena.

"When we go to visit, it's usually in the summer," he added. "We don't have any winter clothes any more."

Deshaies said he and his wife sometimes go skiing in Colorado, where they can leave after seeing their fill of snow.

"It snowed for about 15 minutes last winter," he said. "And that's all the snow I've seen."

