

The Lieutenant and the Medal of Honor NCO

By COL Fredrick Van Horn

We all know the cliché, "Never judge a book by its cover." It's as much true for people as books. One of our Army's great NCO heroes taught me this lesson.

Late in 1967, about half way through my second year with the 1st Bde, 101st Airborne Div in Viet Nam, I was serving as the executive officer of a howitzer battery in the 2d Bn, 320th FA, when a helicopter landed and delivered a new NCO to us.

As a very senior staff sergeant, by all rights he should have gone straight into one of the howitzer sections as section chief. My problem was that I had a line-up of proven, superstar section chiefs that I didn't want to change.

The new NCO looked a little overweight, seemed a little slow, showed a lack confidence, and in general, didn't look like the kind of chief I wanted on the guns in a fight. So, I made it easy on myself and made him the ammunition section chief. I sensed his disappointment, but he handled it quietly and professionally.

SSG Webster Anderson made a great ammo section chief. His people respected him and the soldiers assigned to the section worked harder for him than any previous section chief.

I decided to move him into a howitzer section as soon as one of the "old reliables" left the battery. But I waited too long. Once battalion found out I was using a senior staff sergeant as an ammunition section chief, they sent him to a sister battery that was short on staff sergeants.

Some weeks later, Anderson's battery came under attack. We listened all night long to the fight because we were the only supporting unit in range. We shot defensive fires for them throughout the attack and on into the morning. At first

light, I was ordered to relieve our sister unit in place because they were no longer combat effective.

By the time I got on the ground, all the friendly casualties were evacuated. The battery commander thanked me for the supporting fires as well as for sending him SSG Anderson.

It was clear that Anderson's howitzer section had saved his unit, from total destruction.

As we rebuilt the position and buried the enemy dead, we found a sketch map of the battery position on one of the enemy soldiers. It was correct in every detail but one.

The sketch did not show that the point of their main effort was held by a soldier named SSG Webster Anderson, a man so full of courage and fight that he made the position impregnable just because HE was there.

This was the same quiet, slightly overweight, not so impressive sergeant I made the ammunition sergeant; the same sergeant I worried might not be able to hold up in a fight.

SSG Webster Anderson taught me that judging people totally by appearance is dangerous business. When you absolutely must make a quick judgment about someone, learn as much about who the soldier REALLY is before letting first impressions carry too much weight in your decision-making process.

He showed me through his own personal example the truth in the old saying: "You are what you do when it really counts!" ■

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Webster Anderson

Sergeant First Class
Noncommissioned Officer
Leader
Hero
Medal of Honor Awardee



In the early-morning hours of Oct. 15, 1967, a hostile North Vietnamese Army infantry unit crept up the slope of a steep ridge and attacked Battery A, 2nd Bn, 320th Artillery, 101st Airborne Inf Div (Airmobile).

SFC (then SSG) Webster Anderson was serving as section chief of the battery when the night was split by the sound of enemy heavy mortar, recoilless rifle, rocket-propelled grenade and automatic weapon fire. It was then that Anderson summoned the courage which later earned him the Medal of Honor.

The 34-year-old Anderson climbed to the exposed parapet of the howitzer position and started issuing commands to direct fire on the NVA soldiers who had penetrated the battery defensive line. While he was trying to protect his gun crew, two enemy grenades exploded at his feet, knocking him down and severely wounding him in both legs.

Even though excruciating pain ripped through his body, Anderson remained undaunted. The Medal of Honor citation reads:

"(He) valorously propped himself on the parapet and continued to direct howitzer fire upon the closing enemy and encouraged his men to fight on."

Seeing another grenade roll into the gun pit near a wounded member of his crew, Anderson seized the grenade and tried to throw it out of the pit. As it left his hand, the grenade exploded and he was again wounded.

The citation goes on to say, "Although only partially conscious...Anderson refused medical evacuation and continued to encourage his men in the defense of the position. By his inspirational leadership, professionalism, devotion to duty and complete disregard for his own welfare, (Anderson) was able to maintain the defense of his section's position and to defeat a determined attack."

Anderson lost both legs and his right hand during the attack and retired from the Army in 1969 to work as a TV technician. Later that year, he was presented the Medal of Honor in a ceremony at the White House. ■