NCO Stories

A selection of Valor

First Lieutenant Robert L. Howard

Citation to award the Medal of Honor

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty. 1st Lt. Howard (then sergeant first class), distinguished himself while serving as platoon sergeant of an American-Vietnamese platoon which was on a mission to rescue a missing American Soldier in enemy controlled territory in the Republic of Vietnam. The platoon had left its helicopter landing zone and was moving out on its mission when it was attacked by an estimated two-company force. During the initial engagement, 1st Lt. Howard was wounded and his weapon destroyed by a grenade explosion. 1st Lt. Howard saw his platoon leader had been wounded seriously and was exposed to fire. Although unable to walk, and weaponless, 1st Lt. Howard unhesitatingly crawled through a hail of fire to retrieve his wounded leader. As 1st Lt. Howard was administering first aid and removing the officer's equipment, an enemy bullet struck one of the ammunition pouches on the lieutenant's belt, detonating several magazines of ammunition. 1st Lt. Howard momentarily sought cover and then realizing that he must rejoin the platoon, which had been disorganized by the enemy attack, he again began dragging the seriously wounded officer toward the platoon area. Through his outstanding example of indomitable courage and bravery, 1st Lt. Howard was able to rally the platoon into an organized defense force. With complete disregard for his safety, 1st Lt. Howard crawled from position to position, administering first aid to the wounded, giving encouragement to the defenders and directing their fire on the encircling enemy. For 3 1/2 hours 1st Lt. Howard's small force and supporting aircraft successfully repulsed enemy attacks and finally were in sufficient control to permit the landing of rescue helicopters. 1st Lt. Howard personally supervised the loading of his men and did not leave the bullet-swept landing zone until all were aboard safely. 1st Lt. Howard's gallantry in action, his complete devotion to the welfare of his men at the risk of his life were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit on himself, his unit, and the U.S. Army.

A true American hero

By Spc. Samuel J. Phillips

In the last days of 2009, the United States lost one of its true heroes, though many might not even know his name.

Robert Lewis Howard was born on July 11, 1939, in Opelika, Ala. He enlisted in the Army in 1956 at the age of 17 and joined the 101st Airborne Division, following in the footsteps of his father and four uncles who served as paratroopers during World War II.

During Howard's first tour of duty in Vietnam in 1965, he was wounded by a ricochet bullet that struck him in the face. In the hospital while recovering from his wound, he was recruited by a special forces Soldier to join the Green Berets. Little did he know that this would lead him down the path to becoming an American hero.

Howard served four more tours in Vietnam and became one of the most decorated Soldiers in U.S. history, and the only Soldier in the nation's history to be nominated for the Medal of Honor three times for three separate actions that took place between 1967 and 1968.

Robert L. Howard

Howard's first nomination was for his actions on Nov. 16, 1967, when he lead a covert platoon-sized element on a mission in southeastern Laos. While the main body of the force was destroying an enemy cache, Howard's team engaged a small enemy force and was then pinned down by heavy machine gun fire. After eliminating an enemy sniper, Howard charged and destroyed the two machine gun positions under a hail of enemy fire.

His next nomination for the Medal of Honor came from his actions on Nov. 19, 1968, while on another mission in Laos. The force that Howard was accompanying was ambushed by enemy troops, including a Soviet-built PT-76 tank. Ignoring the intense enemy fire, Howard was able to bear down on and take out the PT-76 with an anti-tank rocket. Howard also braved enemy fire to save two pilots and a door gunner when a medevac helicopter was shot down. The next morning he was able to silence a 37 mm anti-aircraft gun, allowing his unit to be evacuated.

Both awards were downgraded to the Distinguished Service Cross, the nation's second highest award. In 1969, Howard received a direct appointment from master sergeant to first lieutenant, and in 1971 finally received a citation for the Medal of Honor by President Richard M. Nixon for his actions on Dec. 30, 1968, during a rescue mission. Then a sergeant first class acting as a platoon sergeant for an American-Vietnamese force, Howard proved himself once again through gallantry in action and complete devotion to the welfare of his men at the risk of his own life.

At the onset of the mission, Howard's platoon was engaged by an estimated two-company enemy force, and a grenade blast wounded him and destroyed his weapon. Unable to walk and weaponless, Howard unhesitatingly crawled to the aid of his platoon leader who was seriously wounded and exposed to enemy fire.

After dragging the wounded officer through a hail of fire to safety, Howard continued crawling from position to position, rendering aid to the wounded, encouragement to his men and directing their fire on the enemy encircling them. Howard's actions led to his force successfully repulsing the enemy attacks enough for rescue helicopters to land, then he personally ensured that all of his men had been loaded before he left the battlefield.

Throughout Howard's 36-year Army career, he was wounded 14 times and received eight Purple Hearts. Among his other awards are the Silver Star, the Defense Superior Service Medal, multiple Legions of Merit, multiple Bronze Stars, and two Meritorious Service Medals, to name a few.

Howard retired as a full colonel on Sept. 29, 1992, and took up residence in San Antonio, Texas. He worked at the Department of Veterans Affairs as a liaison to other veterans, frequently making trips to battle zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan to share his experiences with Soldiers. He was also the president of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society from 2007 to 2009.

Pancreatic cancer took Howard's life at the age of 70 on Dec. 23, 2009, doing what no enemy force could. Despite Howard's passing, his story will live on and can be found in John L. Plaster's book, *SOG: The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam.*

Texas Gov. Rick Perry issued a statement on the day of Howard's death in which he said Howard "was the bravest soldier I ever met. His unshakeable commitment to freedom, displayed in countless episodes of battlefield gallantry, lives on in the actions of our military men and women who continue to serve in hostile conditions overseas."