

NCO Stories

A selection of Valor



Master Sgt. Roy P. Benavidez *Citation to award the Medal of Honor*

Master Sgt. Roy P. Benavidez, who was assigned to Detachment B56, 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), 1st Special Forces, Republic of Vietnam, distinguished himself with a series of daring and extremely valorous actions on May 2, 1968.

Early that day, a 12-man special forces reconnaissance team was inserted by helicopters in to a dense jungle area west of Loc Ninh, Vietnam. They were to gather intelligence information about confirmed large-scale enemy activity. This area was controlled and routinely patrolled by the North Vietnamese Army.

After a short period of time on ground, the team met heavy enemy resistance and requested emergency extraction. Three helicopters attempted extraction but were unable to land due to intense enemy small arms and anti-aircraft fire.

Benavidez, then a staff sergeant, was at the forward operating base in Loc Ninh monitoring the operation by radio when these helicopters returned to off-load wounded crewmembers and to assess aircraft damage. At that moment, Benavidez voluntarily boarded a returning aircraft to assist in another extraction attempt. Realizing that all the team members were either dead or

wounded and unable to move to the pickup zone, he directed the aircraft to a nearby clearing area where he jumped from the hovering helicopter. He ran about 75 meters under withering small arms fire to the crippled team.

Prior to reaching the team's position, he was wounded in his right leg, face and head. Despite these painful injuries, he took charge. He repositioned the team members, directing their fire to facilitate the landing of an extraction aircraft and boarding of wounded and dead team members. He then threw smoke canisters to direct the aircraft to the team's position.

Despite his severe wounds and being under intense enemy fire, he carried and dragged half of the wounded team members to the awaiting aircraft. He then provided protective fire by running alongside the aircraft as it moved to pick up the remaining team members. As the enemy's fire intensified, he hurried to recover the body and classified documents on the dead team leader.

When he reached the leader's body, Benavidez was severely wounded by small-arms fire in the abdomen and grenade fragments in his back. At nearly the same moment, the aircraft pilot

was mortally wounded, and his helicopter crashed. Although in serious condition because of his multiple wounds, Benavidez secured the classified documents and made his way back to the wreckage, where he aided the wounded out of the overturned aircraft and gathered the stunned survivors into a defensive perimeter.

Under increasing enemy automatic weapons and grenade fire, he moved around the perimeter distributing water and ammunition to his weary men again, instilling in them a will to live and fight.

Facing a buildup of enemy opposition with a beleaguered team, Benavidez mustered his strength, began calling in tactical air strikes and directed the fire from supporting gunships to suppress the enemy and permit another extraction attempt. He was wounded again in his thigh by small arms fire while administering first aid to a wounded team member just before another extraction helicopter was able to land. His indomitable spirit kept him going as he began to ferry his comrades to the craft. On his second trip with the wounded, he was clubbed from additional wounds to his head and arms before killing his adversary. He then continued under devastating fire to carry the wounded to the helicopter. Upon reaching the aircraft, he spotted and killed two enemy soldiers who were rushing the craft from an angle that prevented the aircraft door gunner from firing upon them. With little strength remaining, he made one last trip to the perimeter to ensure that all classified material had been collected or destroyed and to bring in the remaining wounded. Only then, in extremely serious condition from numerous wounds and loss of blood, did he allow himself to be pulled into the extraction aircraft.

Benavidez's gallant choice to voluntarily join his comrades who were in critical straits, to expose himself constantly to withering enemy fire and his refusal to be stopped despite numerous severe wounds saved the lives of at least eight men. His fearless



Photo by Ron Hall

Master Sgt. Roy P. Benavidez, center, is flanked by Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, left, and President Ronald Reagan at his Medal of Honor presentation ceremony in 1981. The special forces Soldier was cited for heroism in Vietnam in 1968.

personal leadership, tenacious devotion to duty and extremely valorous actions in the face of overwhelming odds were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service, and reflect the utmost credit on him and the United States Army.

The life of a young South Texas boy

By Stephanie Sanchez

As a young boy, Roy P. Benavidez would sneak into a cotton gin, climb into the loft and leap onto fluffy cotton. He would imagine he was an airborne Soldier jumping 34 feet from a jump tower.

Becoming a Soldier seemed a faraway dream for the impoverished South Texas boy, who was orphaned at a young age. His family had long worked as sharecroppers, and he dropped out of middle school to help pick sugar beets and cotton. Benavidez, however, conquered life's challenges.

He grew to become a war hero, an advocate for disabled veterans and a Medal of Honor recipient, according to his book *Medal of Honor: One Man's Journey from Poverty and Prejudice*.

At 19 years old, Benavidez joined the Army and went to

Airborne School. While deployed in Vietnam, he was injured by a land mine in 1964. He was told he would never walk again.

But Benavidez overcame his disability, became a Green Beret and returned to combat. During his second tour in Vietnam, he rescued at least eight men who were ambushed by North Vietnamese troops.

Benavidez recovered from his multiple injuries. President Ronald Reagan awarded Benavidez the Medal of Honor on Feb. 24, 1981. He went on to become an advocate for disabled veterans. In 1983, he spoke before the House Select Committee on Aging about the cost-cutting review that planned to terminate disability assistance to 350,000 people.

Benavidez suffered respiratory failure and died at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio in 1998. He was 63.