

Former NCO and son receive Silver Stars during special long-distance ceremonies

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Nearly 30 years separate the conclusion of the Vietnam War and the start of the Global War on Terrorism. While time, tactics and technology make today's military very different from the one that fought in the jungles of Vietnam, a common denominator in the two conflicts has been the bravery and sacrifice of the American Soldier.

The Silver Star is the nation's third-highest award for such displays of bravery and sacrifice. Chief Warrant Officer Jonathan Harris became one of the few Soldiers to receive the prestigious award on the evening of Nov. 28, 2008. But the fact that his father, former Staff Sgt. Gary Harris, was also presented with a Silver Star at the same time made the event all the more meaningful.

Through a video teleconference during a ceremony at Combined Joint Task Force-101 headquarters, Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan, the Harris family watched from a conference room at Fort Campbell, Ky., as the younger Harris was presented the Silver Star by Maj. Gen. Jeffrey Schloesser, CJTF-101 commanding general. Meanwhile, Soldiers from CJTF-101 watched a video screen at Bagram as the elder Harris was pinned with not only the Silver Star, but also a Bronze Star he earned while serving in Vietnam. Neither had been formally presented to him.

"It's very rare that we present the Silver Star," Schloesser explained to those in attendance at both Fort Campbell and Afghanistan. "We have a very high standard, and we make sure that the few who do earn it have done so through selfless sacrifice. It's clear that Mr. Harris did that, and it is also clear that the nation owes a debt to [former] Staff Sgt. Gary Harris. It was almost 40 years ago that he earned it, and I hope that in some small way we can pay back that debt by presenting him his award with his son's today."

Personal courage and selfless service could be said to run in the Harris family bloodline, as both father and son reacted similarly in their encounters with enemy forces. Both risked their lives to ensure the safety of their comrades.

The elder Harris displayed this courage on Aug. 15, 1969, as a squad leader in Vietnam. He and his company were patrolling the outer perimeter near Gol Ree and were attacked with mortars and rocket fire. He quickly directed the members of his squad to

return fire on the enemy.

As the attack died down, he moved his squad closer to the perimeter, which had been weakened during the barrage. As the enemy resumed its assault, he directed his squad to return fire once again, breaking the enemy attack. During the engagement, he risked his life by helping medics aid wounded marines and bring them to safety.

The younger Harris also displayed bravery in the face of danger. On July 2, 2008, Harris, a UH-60 Black Hawk pilot assigned to Charlie Company, 5th Battalion, 101st Combat Aviation Brigade, landed his helicopter at a landing zone near Gardez, Afghanistan, to pick up Soldiers for transport when his aircraft came under attack by enemies using rocket-propelled grenades, a heavy machine gun and various assault rifles.

With the aircraft on fire, Harris and his crew managed to fly it a short distance before putting it down again. After safely exiting the burning helicopter, the entire crew took up a defensive position. They managed to contact a CH-47 Chinook that was in the area to help extract them from the battlefield. As the Chinook landed, the enemy resumed fire.

It was then that Harris, who was helping one of his wounded crew chiefs to the helicopter, exposed himself to fire by engaging and killing an approaching enemy combatant. He entered the helicopter only after ensuring that the members of his crew, the ground forces and the quick-reaction force were safely aboard.

"Mr. Harris has been great since the incident," said Sgt. DeeJay Norby, a crew chief who was also involved in the action at Gardez. "He didn't get down or anything afterward; he went right back to business doing his job. It's really awesome getting to fly with a great group of pilots and crew chiefs."

This is not the first award that Harris has received during this deployment. He was also presented with the Air Medal with "V" device.

In his short address, Harris thanked his flight crew and the crew of the Chinook who performed the rescue operation.

"I'm so lucky to serve with so many great heroes," said Harris. "Without them, the outcome might not have been so good."

He also gave a heartfelt "thank you" to his father, whose life and service set the example for him.

"Every time people thank us for our service, I tell them to thank a Vietnam vet. So Dad, I want to thank you today."



Photo by Spc. George Welcome, 101st CAB Public Affairs
Chief Warrant Officer Jonathan Harris receives a handshake from Maj. Gen. Jeffrey Schloesser, commander, 101st Airborne Division, after being presented the Silver Star.