

Soldiers receive Silver Stars for battlefield valor in Afghanistan

By Sgt. Tony Hawkins
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Thunderous applause filled the John F. Kennedy Auditorium at Fort Bragg, N.C., as seven Soldiers, decorated with the nation's third-highest honor, took the stage at the end of a 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) valor award ceremony Aug. 16.

The Soldiers were each awarded a Silver Star for heroic acts of valor displayed during the group's deployment to Afghanistan from 2007 to 2008. One of the medals was posthumously awarded to Sgt. 1st Class David Nuñez, which was presented to his brother, Spc. Rene Nuñez of the 82nd Airborne Division.

These men "laid it all on the line and risked absolutely everything they care about in life for the sake of the mission at hand, their partners and Afghan forces teammates on their left and right," said Col. James Kraft, the unit's commander. "Ladies and gentlemen, that's true honor."

Lt. Gen. John F. Mulholland, commanding general of the U.S. Army Special Operations Command, was the host of the ceremony. He spoke of the pride and honor he felt in leading the men and women of Army Special Operations.

"Every day in Iraq, Afghanistan and in other countries around the world, American Special Operations Soldiers routinely and consistently exhibit enormously powerful acts of valor and courage on the field of battle," Mulholland said.

As each of the seven Soldiers took the stage to be presented with a medal, vignettes were read about the astonishing actions they took to stop the enemy and protect their comrades.

"When confronted with danger in the fog and friction of close combat, without hesitation you went to the sound of the guns," Kraft said. "You took care of business first rather than taking care of yourself. Each of these Soldiers has a story to tell, but quite frankly, they're too modest to tell it."

Kraft spoke of the valor the men exhibited in the heat of battle, though he said words alone could not do them justice.

"Mere words cannot adequately express and describe one's willingness, one's decision to charge a numerically superior enemy force," he said, "or to maneuver into the jaws of a sophisticated enemy ambush to recover his Afghan brothers. To continue forward at all cost when hit by enemy fire, or to continue to engage the enemy and protect the lives of his teammates, even when engulfed in flames."

However, if you were to ask any of these Soldiers if they did anything special, the typical response would be, "I was just doing my job."

"I didn't really think about doing it; I just did it," Staff Sgt. Mario A. Pinilla, a Special Forces communication sergeant with 1st Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, said about his actions on Aug. 20, 2008. "If I had to do it again, I definitely would."

While conducting a combat reconnaissance patrol in the Khaz Oruzgan district of Afghanistan, his team was ambushed by



Photo by Trisha Harris

Seven Soldiers from the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) were awarded the Silver Star during a ceremony at Fort Bragg, N.C., Aug. 16, for their valorous actions while deployed to Afghanistan between 2007 and 2008. From right to left the recipients are: Sgt. 1st Class Mario Pinilla, Staff Sgt. Daniel Gould, Sgt. 1st Class Jonathan Clouse, Master Sgt. Julio Bocanegra, Sgt. 1st Class Antonio Gonzalez, Chief Warrant Officer Mark Roland and Spc. Rene Nuñez, a member of the 82nd Airborne Division who accepted the posthumous award for his brother, Sgt. 1st Class David Nuñez.

anti-Afghan forces. During the ensuing firefight, Pinilla sprinted 75 meters across open terrain into incoming enemy fire to a wounded teammate, Staff Sgt. Daniel Gould, a Special Forces engineer sergeant, who was pinned down. When Pinilla reached his teammate, he dove in front of him, providing his own body as cover for his wounded comrade as he proceeded to suppress the enemy ambush line.

After 10 minutes of returning fire, Pinilla suffered two gunshot wounds and was critically wounded. His teammates fought to return him to safety, all the while Pinilla continued to return fire with his 9 mm Beretta handgun. Due to the severity of his wounds, he was evacuated from the battlefield and eventually sent to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., where he is slowly recovering.

"It's about trusting the man to your left and right and knowing that he will do the right thing and watch your back," he said. "That's what I was doing for (Gould), and he did the same for me. I wouldn't be here today if not for him."

Gould said it was the closeness his team shared that enabled them to risk their lives for each other.

"When you have the camaraderie that we have, the actions become instantaneous," Gould said. "The cohesion that is built within the team is key."

It is that camaraderie and familiarity within the team that allows its members to perform such acts of heroism.