

NCO Stories

A selection of Valor



1st Sgt. David Herbert McNerney

Citation to award the Medal of Honor

1st Sgt. McNerney distinguished himself when his unit was attacked by a North Vietnamese battalion near Poley Doc. Running through the hail of enemy fire to the area of heaviest contact, he was assisting in the development of a defensive perimeter when he encountered several enemy at close range.

He killed the enemy but was painfully injured when blown from his feet by a grenade. In spite of this injury, he assaulted and destroyed an enemy machine-gun position that had pinned down five of his comrades beyond the defensive line. Upon learning his commander and artillery forward observer had been killed, he assumed command of the company. He adjusted artillery fire to within 20 meters of the position in a daring measure to repulse enemy assaults.

When the smoke grenades used to mark the position were gone, he moved into a nearby clearing to designate the location to friendly aircraft. In spite of enemy fire, he remained exposed until he was certain the position was spotted and then climbed into a tree and tied the identification panel to its highest branches.

Then he moved among his men, readjusting their position, encouraging the defenders and checking the wounded. As the hostile assaults slackened, he began clearing a helicopter landing site to evacuate the wounded.

When explosives were needed to remove large trees, he crawled outside the relative safety of his perimeter to collect demolition material from abandoned rucksacks. Moving through a fusillade of fire he returned with the explosives that were vital to the clearing of the landing zone.

Disregarding the pain of his injury and refusing medical evacuation, 1st Sgt. McNerney remained with his unit until the next day when the new commander arrived. First Sgt. McNerney's outstanding heroism and leadership were inspirational to his comrades.

His actions were in keeping with the highest traditions of the U.S. Army and reflect great credit upon himself and the armed forces of his country.

'I was a professional Soldier'

By Sgt. Samuel J. Phillips

On March 22, 1967, 1st Sgt. David H. McNerney found himself in the jungles of Vietnam on his third tour of duty since volunteering for special warfare training in 1962. He was among the first 500 U.S. military advisers sent into Vietnam and deployed to the country again in 1964. McNerney was more than familiar with the jungle and the dangers it hid.

"Let me tell you how things are in this company," McNerney is said to have told his Soldiers. "You do what I tell you to do, and you do it when I tell you to do it, because you will die in Vietnam if you don't."

On that March day, McNerney's company would find out the importance of his words during a mission to rendezvous with a reconnaissance unit that had reportedly disappeared in a remote area near Polei Doc in South Vietnam close to the Cambodian border.

While making its way through thick vegetation, the company of 108 Soldiers was ambushed by the Viet Cong. While the front column was hit with heavy fire, the rear platoon was also surprised by an attack from behind. Both the commanding officer and the forward artillery observer were killed in the initial ambush.

Before the company could take up defensive positions, they found themselves surrounded and outnumbered at least 3-to-1. In the first minutes of the battle, the Viet Cong decimated the company, killing 22 Americans and wounding about 40 more. McNerney realized that, as the senior enlisted man, it was up to him to take control of the remaining Soldiers and coordinate a counterattack.

Through a hail of enemy fire, McNerney was sprinting toward the frontlines to get a better perspective of the battle and assist in the development of a defensive perimeter when several enemies engaged him at close range. Taking quick action, he returned fire, killing the group of Viet Cong in front of him. But, he was blown into the air and suffered a laceration to his chest when a grenade exploded just a few feet away.

With the enemy fast approaching, however, McNerney ignored his wounds and recovered the artillery observer's radio. He immediately began to call in heavy rounds to within 65 feet of his position in an attempt to push back enemy assaults.

Then, when the colored smoke grenades used to mark the company's position had been expended, McNerney was forced to make another quick decision. Completely disregarding his own safety, McNerney grabbed his unit's brightly colored insignia panel and navigated his way through substantial enemy fire to a tall tree in a clearing. Without hesitation, he climbed the tree and tied the panel to one of its highest branches so it could be seen by friendly aircraft.

After marking their position, McNerney checked on wounded Soldiers and provided support to the men defending their position. But there was another obstacle facing McNerney: the jungle



Photo by Alan Boedeker

David McNerney, a retired first sergeant from Company A, 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division, and Medal of Honor recipient, attends the Victorian Gala Ball during Fiesta Week at San Antonio on April 4, 2005.

was too dense for helicopters to land to evacuate the company.

Knowing what he needed to do, McNerney braved enemy fire once again, crawling to an exposed area beyond his unit's defensive line to collect demolition materials dropped during the initial ambush. He then wrapped the trunks of several trees with the salvaged explosives and blew them up to create a landing zone.

Despite his severe injuries, McNerney refused to be evacuated with the rest of the wounded when the helicopters finally arrived. He stayed on the battlefield until he was relieved by a new commanding officer the next day.

McNerney received the Medal of Honor from President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1968 before volunteering for a fourth tour of duty in Vietnam. He retired from the Army in 1969 and settled in Crosby, Texas.

In 1986, when asked about his actions on March 22, 1967, McNerney told *Texas Monthly* magazine, "I was a professional Soldier. That was my job. That's why I did what I did. It wasn't a normal day. I was fighting for my life."

Last May, a documentary based on McNerney's Army career titled, "Honor in the Valley of Tears," was released.

McNerney died of lung cancer on Oct. 10, 2010, at a veterans hospital in Houston. He was 79.