



Retired Sgt. Santiago Erevia explains the medals he was awarded during his service as a Soldier in Vietnam. He will receive the Medal of Honor at a White House ceremony March 18. (Photo by Michael L. Lewis)

45 Years After Their Gallantry, Retired NCOs are Humbled to Receive Nation's Highest Honor

By Michael L. Lewis

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Three former NCOs were living lives of quiet retirement. Then one day last year, the president called.

More than four decades after they performed heroically in combat — actions all three say they'd rather not relive, but will never forget — President Barack Obama phoned to tell them they will receive the Medal of Honor in a White House ceremony next week. It's overdue recognition for 24 Soldiers in total — most of them African-American, Hispanic or Jewish — whose acts of valor merited the nation's highest military award, but who did not receive it in the aftermath of the wars in which they fought.

Of those two dozen nominees, only three veterans of the Vietnam War are still alive to receive the honor in person: retired Master Sgt. Jose Rodela, 76, and retired Sgt. Santiago J. Erevia, 68, both of San Antonio, and retired Sgt. 1st Class Melvin Morris, 72, of Port St. John, Fla. They were Soldiers fighting in the Vietnam War when, on three particular days in 1969, a formidable combination of training, instinct, heart and luck propelled them to risk their lives to help their troops.

Though each certainly "distinguished himself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty" — the quali-



Lt. Gen. Harry H. Critz (left), then the commander of Fourth U.S. Army, awards Erevia the Distinguished Service Cross at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, in 1970. That award will be upgraded to the Medal of Honor next week. (Photo courtesy of Santiago Erevia)

fications to be awarded the Medal of Honor — they received instead the Distinguished Service Cross, the nation's second-highest award for valor. For whatever reason — racism, religious bigotry, or just poor record keeping — they were denied the honor due to them until a review ordered by Congress in 2002 discovered the oversight. Yet, despite the interim of 40-plus years, not one of them is bitter or angry that it took so long. Indeed, they are just immensely appreciative.

"I don't have any anger for not being presented with it earlier," Rodela said.

"I'm not a bitter person. I never thought about it or worried about it," Morris said. "Back when I got the Distinguished Service Cross, I thought that was what they figured I should get, and that was that. I just went on about my business. When this came up, I'm proud it did, but I never worried about not receiving the Medal of Honor."

"I had a former supervisor of mine call me the other day, and he said, 'You should have gotten that medal a long, long time ago,'" Erevia said. "It sounds like they're more disappointed than I am. I'm just happy to be receiving it now. I'm grateful for it."

Erevia: This medal is for them

Erevia, who grew up in Corpus Christi, Texas, decided at age 22 to volunteer for the Army rather than wait to get called up in the draft.

"I knew I was going to get called up, so I enlisted," Erevia said. "It was supposed to be a two-year deal: If you enlisted, you would only spend two years. If you were drafted, it would be three."

Upon arriving in Vietnam, then Spc. 4 Erevia was assigned to Company C, 1st Battalion (Airmobile), 501st

Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division. And almost immediately, the reality of jungle warfare became apparent.

"We had the whole company go to a town where there were supposedly mines all around. This was my second day [in Vietnam]" Erevia said. "We were in line [marching], and maybe 200 or 300 yards from where I was, one guy stepped on a mine, and his boot landed about ten feet from where I was. And that was my first experience there; I had only about 350 days to go."

Frustratingly, Erevia said he saw his unit be diminished in piecemeal fashion as fellow Soldiers succumbed to mines. Yet, direct contact with the enemy remained elusive.

"You weren't really seeing the enemy. You were just avoiding mines," he said. "We lost quite a few people in those first 30 days. ... A Soldier would step on a mine, and we'd lose one or three or four. It kind of gets to you, because you never know where you're going to step. I was pretty lucky I never stepped on one. It made me pretty cautious."

Erevia soon earned the nickname "Mr. Lucky" for his fortuitous ability to avoid getting hurt.

"One night, we had a Claymore out there, and a Viet Cong came and stole it right in front of everybody. In the morning, we went out on a 2- or 3-mile march, and when we were coming back, I was the point man. I climbed through a culvert, and the next guy took over point. The radio operator was the second or third guy, and I was number four. So we kept on going, and the guy who was now point stepped on that [stolen] Claymore, and everyone in front of me got wounded, except for me. I was that lucky. And that's when I took over the job of radio operator."

On May 21, 1969, Erevia's unit was part of a search-and-clear operation in the valley and foothills near



To be awarded the Medal of Honor, a recipient must have "distinguished himself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty" (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

the city of Tam Ky in the Quang Tan province of South Vietnam. There, his unit managed to fight its way across an open rice paddy with only a couple of casualties. But upon reaching the opposite hillside, the unit became trapped under relentless fire from four enemy bunkers about 50 meters away.

“My captain was pinned down, him and two others, and they were getting fired on,” Erevia recalled. “Me and another guy joined him a few minutes later, and we had some protection there. As soon as we got there, he said, ‘Erevia, you and Diehl go up there and see what you can do.’”

Erevia and Cpl. Patrick R. Diehl, a 19-year-old from Chagrin Falls, Ohio, were tasked with aiding four wounded comrades while the rest of the platoon pushed forward against the enemy bunkers.

“There was a tree maybe 10 or 12 feet away from where the captain was, and we went up there and stood against it. My friend Diehl immediately got a bullet in his forehead, and he fell there. So that put me in a situation where I said to myself, ‘What now, Erevia? Are you going to stand here and get shot, or are you going to fight?’ I didn’t have much time to think.”

According to Erevia’s Distinguished Service Cross citation, “with bullets striking all around him, he proceeded to crawl from wounded to wounded gathering up weapons and ammunition” — a total of two M-16 rifles and several hand grenades. He then moved forward to the line of bunkers.

“By then, I had located two of the [North Vietnamese Army soldiers] firing at us,” he said. “So I charged up and I was able to get maybe 5 or 10 feet away from them. I threw a grenade and took them out, and then I went

in back of them and was able to take that guy out. Then there was another one maybe 10 or 15 feet away from that one. I located him and was able to also take him out with a grenade.”

Despite the intense fusillade of bullets hitting all around him, Erevia was relentless in single-handedly destroying three of the four bunkers. But by then, he had run out of grenades and had only his two M-16s left.

“Then I just started walking to the final one,” he said. “That guy came out of his spider hole, and the mistake he made was firing into the air. He was maybe 3 feet from where I was. So, I shot him, point-blank, and took him out. By then, I had reinforcements come. We had one guy who was wounded, so we took him to safety. And that was it.”

Erevia left active duty in 1970 and, in 1972, he joined the Texas National Guard, where he served for 17 years. He also had a 32-year career working for the U.S. Postal Service, where he retired in 2002.

Like the other two living nominees, Erevia does not like to recount what happened that day. Nonetheless he said he does so as a tribute to Diehl, the battle buddy whom he has never been able to forget.

“Diehl — 45 years later, I still remember him plainly,” Erevia said. “Prior to that day, we had skirmishes where we were fighting together. He was a brave man. He got the Silver Star, but I think he should have gotten something better.”

“They say dead people probably don’t get as much recognition as the live ones. But there were a lot of brave people out there. To those guys, I would say this medal is for you.” ■

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