



Retired Master Sgt. Jose Rodela looks at a photo of him being awarded the Distinguished Service Cross in 1970. That award will be upgraded to the Medal of Honor next week. (Photo by Michael L. Lewis)

Medal of Honor Nominee Master Sgt. Rodela: They Were My People

By Michael L. Lewis

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Then-Sgt. 1st Class Jose Rodela had already served 14 years in the Army when in 1969, as part of Detachment B-36, Company A, 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), he was given the task of training raw Cambodian recruits to fight against the North Vietnamese. Little did he know, however, that his valorous actions with a unit of foreign troops he built from scratch would, 45 years later, lead to him receiving the Medal of Honor.

“I recruited them, I trained them, I took them to war,” Rodela said. “All of the others in that Special Forces company had companies of Vietnamese to train, but I was the only one with Cambodians. They turned out to be pretty good soldiers. I lucked out.”

Rodela was following where two other comrades — Sgt. 1st Class Joseph Haga, a 25-year-old from Miami, and Staff Sgt. Rudolfo Chavez, a 32-year-old from Santa Ana, Calif. — had gone before, training units of South Vietnamese troops to fight. Both were killed in action, which still weighs heavily on Rodela, who is now a 76-year-old retiree living in San Antonio.

“Joe Haga and Rudy Chavez were before me. But they didn’t make it back.”

On Sept. 1, 1969 — a hot and sticky, overcast day — Rodela was acting as a company commander with 3rd Battalion, 3rd Mobile Strike Force Command, in the steep, jungle-covered hills of Phuoc Long province, Vietnam.

“That day, we were after a battalion-sized North Vietnamese unit,” Rodela recalls. “I had about 100 to 120 men, all Cambodians. It had just started to get daylight. We found these machine-gun positions. They were surprised; they didn’t know we were there — despite all the noise we were making walking through the jungle.”

About 800 meters from its objective, the battalion became inundated with nearly every imaginable form of bullets and rockets, Rodela’s Distinguished Service Cross citation says. Rockets, 81 mm mortars, light and heavy machine-gun fire, and small-arms fire rained down on Rodela’s men, inflicting 42 casualties almost immediately.

“Because of the intensity of the enemy fire and the numerous casualties, a critical state of confusion was present and the battalion was on the brink of panic,”

the citation says. “[Rodela] realized that if his troops did not overcome the initial shock and reorganize, the entire battalion might be overrun in an enemy assault.”

Throughout the 18-hour ordeal, Rodela would move from man to man, tending to the wounded and sometimes physically pushing those who were able into defensive positions.

“I was looking for wounded and dead. That’s the reason I did it,” he said. “My people, when they got hurt, they didn’t say anything. They didn’t want to be separated from the rest of the people; they’re so tight, they wanted to stay, no matter how serious they got hurt.”

At one point, Rodela noticed a break in the fire from a nearby enemy position.

“The belt of their machine gun got twisted,” Rodela said. “They were so scared trying to get the machine gun to work — one of ours, a .30-caliber. So I approached them, knocked out their position and got the rest of my people so we could keep going.”

And they had to, because the battle continued mercilessly.

“The immense concentration of enemy fire which was brought to bear on Rodela’s position is practically impossible to describe with any justice,” the citation

says. “His entire company was hidden by dust, smoke and exploding enemy mortar and rocket rounds. The dead and wounded were laying the entire length of his defensive line. That his unit did not break and run to the rear is a great tribute to Rodela’s leadership.”

But Rodela said the credit really goes to having good troops to train, lead and care for.

“They were my people. I trained them,” he said. “It had taken me almost a month and a half to train these people and get them ready for war. That was my job. When my commander told me to go out, get myself some people and go to war, that’s what I did.”

That Rodela was wounded during the battle, but carried out his actions undeterred is one reason he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross while recovering at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. He didn’t get much rest, however, because his combat-proven ability to train foreign troops was desperately needed elsewhere, despite him being decorated with the nation’s second-highest award for valor, which will next week be upgraded to the Medal of Honor.

“After that, I went to Central and South America and did the same thing,” he said. “Special Forces is such a small community, they send you where they



Rodela (front row, center) poses with the Cambodian soldiers of his unit. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)



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)

need you. But nobody treated me differently. They didn’t even think about it.”

Indeed, the unassuming Rodela prefers it that way. “I don’t like to be singled out. I never did and I still don’t,” he said.

But recalling what happened that day in 1969 reminds him of those who aren’t around to tell their own stories of valor.

“I just regret that Joe Haga and Rudy Chavez aren’t here. They were in combat with me, but they didn’t make it. They were family men, just like me. But they didn’t come back.”

Rodela said that all Soldiers and NCOs are capable of their own feats of heroism if they pay attention and rely on their training.

“Any member of the Army can do the same thing as I did. Just remember your training,” he said. “They gave me people to train, I was responsible for them. I had to train them for any kind of danger, and my people came through on that day.

“We’re one Army, one discipline. It’s up to you to keep at it or go your own way. But if you try to go at it alone, you won’t last long,” he said.

“So don’t forget your training. If you learn something, doggone it, keep it. Use it.” ■

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