



Retired Sgt. 1st Class Melvin Morris explains the awards on the uniform he has meticulously maintained and that he plans to wear at the White House ceremony next week during which he'll be awarded the Medal of Honor. (Photo by Michael L. Lewis)

Medal of Honor Nominee Sgt. 1st Class Morris: With Training, You Don't Think; You Do

By Michael L. Lewis

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The first thing retired Sgt. 1st Class Melvin Morris had to do after the president called to tell him he'd be receiving the Medal of Honor next week was to recover from the shock. The second thing — he got to work.

“When the phone rang and he said, ‘This is President Obama,’ I almost fell out of my chair,” said Morris, now 72 and living in Port St. John, Fla. “He said, ‘I want to apologize to you for not receiving the Medal of Honor 45 years ago.’ But he could tell I was nervous, so he told me, ‘Be cool. Be cool.’”

Morris soon realized he now had an extraordinary platform to continue to train Soldiers — this time, about getting help for post-traumatic stress.

“I told my wife that I was not about to turn down anything, because I have my message as an NCO — I’m going after PTSD hard, because I suffered from it. I had a terrible time,” he said. “But I did go get help. I told myself, ‘Self, something ain’t right about you.’ I finally turned myself into the [Veterans Administration], and they took good care of me.”



Morris as a young Soldier in Vietnam. (Photo courtesy of Melvin Morris)

Morris said he likely would have suffered from post-traumatic stress even without engaging the enemy the way he did Sept. 17, 1969. But his humility belies his actions that day that were undeniably heroic.

Morris, then a staff sergeant with Detachment A-403, D Company, 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), was commanding 3rd Company, 3rd Battalion, IV Mobile Strike Force, which was performing a search-and-clear operation northeast of Chi Lang, Vietnam.

As the unit encountered a bunker complex near a thick wood line, the sudden enemy fire became so intense that many of the friendly forces the American troops were fighting with fled; the detachment's team sergeant, Sgt. 1st Class Ronald D. Hagen, was shot and killed atop the forward-most bunker; and the battalion commander, Capt. Thomas M. Daniels III, was shot in the arm and mouth and left unable to organize a defense.

When Morris' company was called forward to reinforce the demoralized 1st and 2nd Companies, he realized that it was up to him to reorganize the fighting force, says Morris' citation for the Distinguished Service Cross, which will be upgraded to the Medal of Honor next week. He then designated two Soldiers to help him retrieve the body of his slain team sergeant. But as they advanced toward the closest bunker, the two Soldiers were shot, and Morris was forced to help them crawl back to their friendly position.

As the only leader left, Morris went from man to man among the friendly forces, physically directing their fire at the enemy positions. He then began advancing in a crawl to Hagen's body, but was forced to withdraw yet again.

Though they were nearly completely demoralized, Morris was able, "by sheer strength

of persuasion," to get his troops to hold their positions, his citation says.

"I was focused on doing what I had to do," Morris said. "I needed to get them out."

He then mounted one last daring recovery attempt.

"Realizing the futility of a covered, and thereby slower, advance, Morris began running toward the enemy positions," his citation reads. "In retaliation, the enemy again blazed away with extraordinary fire power. As Morris approached the bunker on which the body of Hagen lay, a machine gun inside the bunker was directed against him. [But] the weapon firing from the port in the bunker was unable to elevate because of the narrowness of

the port, and the rounds went directly between Morris' legs. Had he not been rapidly advancing, he would have been cut to pieces by those fires. As a result, however, Morris dove to the side and dropped a hand grenade into the bunker."

"The guy I had to take out, it was an instantaneous decision, because you let your training take over then," Morris said. "Everything I was taught, I was using, because I'm out there by myself, and they want me. If I don't do something, I'm going to be dead or a POW — probably a POW, and that wasn't going to happen. Everything that I was ever taught was coming to the surface."

He then moved from bunker to bunker, using each bunker as cover for the next, his citation continues. "So fierce was his single-handed attack, as Morris approached



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)

one of the bunkers, two [North Vietnamese Army] soldiers, totally bewildered by his actions, chose to flee the bunker in which they were fighting, rather than face the onslaught of this seemingly half-crazed American.”

Remarkably unscathed, Morris retrieved the body of his team sergeant and began moving toward the rest of his troops. But that is when two bunkers at the peripheries of the complex began firing at Morris, striking him in the hand, arm and chest. Nonetheless, he managed to reach safety and immediately collapsed.

“I remember when I got shot,” Morris said. “I had medical training, so I was looking for the exit wound. I didn’t know how I was going to plug it, but I wanted to find it. I noticed I had bubbles coming out the wound in my chest — ‘OK, the air is escaping, got to plug that.’ But then I’m searching for a wound in my back that would be different, that would be sucking in. That’s when I realized I was shot in the arm; I didn’t know it. I was also shot in this finger. Tough day.

“My assistant there, then an E-4, called me the other day and said, ‘You know why you weren’t killed?’ I said, ‘Because they didn’t shoot straight?’ He said, ‘No! You got shot in the chest, but you had happened to take your ID tags and put them into your chest pocket to keep from moving around. That bullet struck your ID tags. I know because I took them off of you.’ If it hadn’t been for those ID tags, he said that bullet would have torn out my heart. And I just found this out the other day.”

Morris credits his Army training for his survival that day.

“When things were going on, I didn’t even hear the bullets. The adrenaline had taken over, and all your instinct and training are kicking in,” he said. “And that’s the one valuable thing I’ll tell you: You can sit in your training and say it’s boring, it’s tiring, it’s repetitive. No. Take it. Deal with it. Because that training will kick in when you are under stress.

“With training, you don’t think. You do. I mean, I was doing things I did not know I was capable of doing. I’m doing all the right things and it’s coming automatically. Well, that’s training. And the Army knows that. That’s why they keep pushing the repetition, because after a

while, it’s locked into your memory bank and will come out when you need it. That’s what happened to me. And thank goodness I had that training. That medical [training] kicked in automatically. I knew what to do right away without anybody having to tell me anything.

“So, I would tell any young Soldier, you have to take and believe in that training and follow through with it. It’s simple: If you don’t get the proper training, you’re not going to last.”

After recovering in the States, Morris was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross in 1970 and then volunteered for a second tour in Vietnam. He said he is actually grateful he wasn’t awarded the Medal of Honor then, because he probably wouldn’t have been able to do as well the job he was trained to do.

“I think they put more pressure on me *because* I was highly decorated,” he said. “They expected me to do well, to do my job better, to be a leader. So there was a lot of pressure, but I kept up the pace. But if I had been awarded the Medal of Honor then, I would have been sidelined. That’s why I have no regrets, no remorse, no bad feelings, nothing.”

And now that he is about to receive the nation’s highest award for valor, the only thing he wants to get out of it is to prompt Soldiers to seek help.

“I got into that denial thing, but things kept getting worse every day,” he said. “I lived with it for so many years, and it will take you away. It’s a family killer. It’s a life-destroyer. But it will all turn around if you can convince troops to get help.” ■

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