



The newest living recipients of the Medal of Honor stand during a ceremony at the White House on Tuesday. From left are retired Sgt. 1st Class Melvin Morris, retired Master Sgt. Jose Rodela and retired Sgt. Santiago J. Erevia. (Photo by E.J. Hersom)

President Awards ‘Long Overdue’ Medal of Honor to 24 Soldiers, Including 17 NCOs

By Michael L. Lewis

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In an emotion-filled ceremony at a crowded East Room at the White House on Tuesday, President Barack Obama awarded the Medal of Honor to 24 Soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War, Korean War and World War II.

“The presentation of our nation’s highest military decoration — the Medal of Honor — is always a special occasion,” Obama said. “But today, it is truly historic. This is the single largest group of service members to be awarded the Medal of Honor since the Second World War. And with several of these Soldiers recognized for their valor during that war, this ceremony is 70 years in the making. As one family member has said, this is long overdue.”

The awarding of the medal comes after a review Congress mandated in 2002 of hundreds of personnel records belonging to service members who should have received the Medal of Honor for their heroic actions, but didn’t due to the fact they were Hispanic, African-American, Jewish or simply overlooked. The Army alone scrutinized more than 600 recipients of the Distinguished Service Cross and found 24 whose actions merited the nation’s highest award for valor. But of that group, only three were still living when Army officials notified the recipients or their family members last year.

“Some of these Soldiers fought and died for a country that did not always see them as equal,” Obama said. “But



Erevia receives the Medal of Honor from President Barack Obama on Tuesday. (Photo by E.J. Hersom)



Rodela receives the Medal of Honor from Obama on Tuesday. (Photo by E.J. Hersom)



Morris receives the Medal of Honor from Obama on Tuesday. (Photo by E.J. Hersom)

ask their fellow veterans, ask their families, and they'll tell you that their extraordinary deeds merited the highest recognition. And today, we have the chance to set the record straight."

Obama described the group of two dozen men as "Americans by birth and Americans by choice — immigrants, including one who was not yet even a citizen." They included 17 noncommissioned officers, 17 Hispanics, eight who fought in the Vietnam War, eight who fought in the Korean War, and seven who fought in World War II.

"They were so young — many in their early 20s," Obama said. "And when their country went to war, they answered the call. They put on the uniform and hugged their families goodbye."

But once on the battlefield, they performed valorous actions that, in every instance, saved the lives of many Soldiers, often at the cost of their own, Obama explained.

"They fought in the rocky hills of Italy, the blood-stained beaches of France, in the freezing mountains of Korea, the humid jungles of Vietnam. Their courage almost defies imagination," he said. "When you read the records of these individuals, it's unimaginable the valor that they displayed: running into bullets; charging machine gun nests and climbing aboard tanks and taking them out; covering their comrades so they could make it to safety; holding back enemies, wave after wave, even when the combat was hand-to-hand; manning their posts — some to their very last breaths — so that their comrades might live."

Obama singled out the three living recipients — retired Sgt. Santiago J. Erevia, retired Master Sgt. Jose Rodela and retired Sgt. 1st Class Melvin Morris. He recalled that the humble Rodela hadn't even told his neighbors of his being awarded the Medal of Honor, neighbors who would likely be shocked when they saw the evening news that night. He joked of wanting to ask for marriage advice from Morris, who has been married to his wife, Mary, for 53 years. And he spoke of Erevia's penchant for doing push-ups to stay in shape.

"These are extraordinary Americans. They are exemplary Soldiers," Obama said.

All three former NCOs then received their medals from the president wearing perfectly arranged Army Service Uniforms bearing the insignia of their former units. Afterward, Obama called the three up again to laud their heroism and service.

"In the thick of the fight, all those years ago, for your comrades and your country, you refused to yield," Obama said. "And on behalf of a grateful nation, we all want to thank you for inspiring us — then and now — with your strength, your will and your heroic hearts."

The medal was then accepted by family members on behalf of the posthumous recipients, with Obama frequently comforting them as they became emotional during the reading of the citation. Among the family members was Sgt. Ashley Randall, who, unbeknownst to her, was serving in Afghanistan as a generator mechanic with the exact same battalion that her grandfather, Pfc. Demensio Rivera, was in when he was killed in action in Korea. Additionally, Command Sgt. Maj. Michael A. Grinston, the command sergeant major of the 1st Infantry Division, accepted the medal on behalf of Sgt. Candelario Garcia, who was serving in the 1st Infantry Division when he performed the actions that would, more than 45 years later, earn him the Medal of Honor.

The other family members who accepted the Medal of Honor on behalf of their deceased relatives:

- Lenora Alvarado, on behalf of her father, Spc. 4 Leonard L. Alvarado,
- Richard Conde, on behalf of his father, Staff Sgt. Felix M. Conde-Falcon,
- Shyrell Jean Copas, on behalf of her father, Sgt. Ardie R. Copas,
- Tina Duran-Ruvalcaba, on behalf of her father, Sgt. Jesus S. Duran,
- Charles Baldonado, on behalf of his brother, Cpl. Joe R. Baldonado,
- Tyrone Espinoza, on behalf of his father, Sgt. Victor H. Espinoza,
- Pete Corral, on behalf of his uncle, Sgt. 1st Class Eduardo C. Gomez,
- Laurie Wegner, on behalf of her uncle, Pfc. Leonard M. Kravitz,
- Iris Negron, on behalf of her father, Master Sgt. Juan E. Negron,
- Michael David Peña, on behalf of his father, Master Sgt. Mike C. Peña,

- Joe Rodriguez, on behalf of his uncle, Pvt. Miguel A. Vera,
- Nancy Weinstein, on behalf of her husband, Sgt. Jack Weinstein,
- Dominga Perez, on behalf of her father, Pvt. Pedro Cano,
- Miriam Adams, on behalf of her uncle, Pvt. Joe Gandara,
- Alfonzo Lara, on behalf of his brother, Staff Sgt. Salvador J. Lara,
- Patricia Kennedy, on behalf of her father, Staff Sgt. William F. Leonard,
- Alice Mendoza, on behalf of her husband, Master Sgt. Manuel V. Mendoza,
- Robert Nietzel, on behalf of his first cousin, Sgt. Alfred B. Nietzel,
- Dr. Terry Schwab, on behalf of his father, 1st Lt. Donald K. Schwab.

"It is very rare where we have the opportunity to reflect on the extraordinary courage and patriotism of such a remarkable collection of men," Obama said, concluding the ceremony. "We are so grateful to them. We are so grateful to their families. It makes us proud and it makes us inspired."

The families were treated to dinner at the White House following the ceremony. The recipients will also be inducted into the Hall of Heroes at the Pentagon in a ceremony today. ■

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