



STAFF SGT. DAVID B. BLEAK

MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENT

This Month in NCO History: June 14, 1952 — Fearlessness at Minari-gol, South Korea

By Pablo Villa

As a combat medic, Staff Sgt. David Bruce Bleak was already a hero to the scores of Soldiers he treated after they were injured on the battlefield.

But what he did on June 14, 1952, near Minari-gol, South Korea, elevated him to a status deserving of the nation's highest military honor. Bleak was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions after his patrol came under heavy fire from Chinese soldiers. Despite being wounded, Bleak killed five enemy soldiers — four of them with his bare hands — before assisting the wounded and shielding one of them from a grenade blast, according to his Medal of Honor citation.

Bleak enlisted in the U.S. Army in November 1950 in his native Idaho Falls, Idaho. During basic training at Fort Riley, Kan., the towering 6-foot-5, 250-pound Bleak was selected for medical duty. He was assigned to the 223rd Infantry Regiment, 40th Infantry Division of the California National Guard, which deployed for the Korean War in January 1952, the same year Bleak was promoted to sergeant.

On that fateful June day, Bleak volunteered to be part of a 20-man reconnaissance patrol looking to capture Hill

499 in northeastern Korea where Chinese soldiers were known to be operating. As the patrol slogged up the hill, it came under heavy machine-gun fire from multiple positions. Bleak sprang into action from the formation's rear as several Soldiers were wounded during the opening volley.

The patrol split into two groups — one continued up the hill while the other attempted to go around to flank the enemy. Bleak was with the group ascending the hill when it came under fire again. According to his citation, Bleak witnessed a wounded Soldier fall and then proceeded to rush the trench where the gunfire originated. He fell on top of Chinese soldier, breaking his neck. He then grabbed a second soldier by the neck, fatally crushing his windpipe. A third Chinese soldier happened upon the scuffle and Bleak stabbed him with his combat knife.

Bleak emerged from the stronghold and resumed treating his wounded comrades. While administering first aid, he witnessed a live grenade bounce off a fellow Soldier's helmet. Bleak scrambled to his feet, tackled the Soldier and shielded him from the blast, which, miraculously, resulted in no injuries to either Soldier.

After stabilizing all the wounded he could, Bleak was attempting to return to the position of his patrol when he saw three more of his fellow Soldiers get hit by a hidden machine-gun nest. As he ran toward them, Bleak was wounded in the leg. He disregarded his injury and treated the downed Soldiers, allowing two of them to retreat to safety. The third Soldier was badly injured and immobilized. Bleak hoisted the semi-conscious Soldier onto his shoulders and trudged toward a safe position.

As he made his way down the hill, two Chinese soldiers confronted Bleak armed with rifles and bayonets. The combat medic placed his wounded patient on the ground and charged at the surprised enemy duo. According to the citation, Bleak smashed their heads together with such force that he killed them and possibly even fractured their skulls before he gathered his fellow Soldier and continued on to safety.

Eventually, all 20 Soldiers returned to friendly lines. A third of them were wounded. Bleak was credited with ensuring that the entire patrol returned alive by treating the wounded and neutralizing enemy threats. After retiring as a staff sergeant, he received the Medal of Honor from President Dwight D. Eisenhower on Oct. 27, 1953, in a ceremony at the White House.

Bleak returned to his native Idaho after his military career. He married Lois Pickett Bleak and had four children. He died March 23, 2006, in Arco, Idaho. His remains were cremated and scattered in Idaho. A cenotaph in his honor sits at the Lost River Cemetery in Butte County, Idaho. Bleak's family donated his Medal of Honor to the Idaho Military History Museum, where it is displayed today. ■

— *Compiled by Pablo Villa*



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