



Vietnam War Medal of Honor recipient retired Army Sgt. Maj. Jon Cavaiani, left, chats with Marine Corps Sgt. Maj. Mark Allen of the 6th Motor Transport Battalion based in Red Bank, N.J., during the Marine Corps Law Enforcement Foundation's 10th Annual Invitational Gala in Atlantic City, N.J., June 12. (Photo by Rudi Williams )

# Vietnam War Medal of Honor Recipient Dies

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Army News Service

**M**edal of Honor recipient, Vietnam prisoner of war and Special Forces legend Sgt. Maj. Jon R. Cavaiani lost his long battle with a bone marrow disorder July 29, passing away at 70 years old, in Stanford, California.

Cavaiani received the Medal of Honor in 1974, from President Gerald Ford for his actions in trying to fight

off an overpowering number of enemy forces who had attacked his security platoon camp within enemy-held territory, on June 4-5, 1971.

With complete disregard for himself, the then-staff sergeant moved around the camp perimeter directing fire and rallying the outgunned and outnumbered platoon in a desperate fight for survival. He also used a variety of weap-

ons to return suppressive fire. When the platoon was to be evacuated, Cavaiani voluntarily remained to direct three helicopters in to evacuate a major part of the platoon.

The remainder of his Special Forces platoon was forced to stay in camp overnight, expecting to be evacuated the next morning. On the morning of June 5, due to low, heavy ground fog, the helicopters were unable to retrieve the remainder of the platoon.

The superior enemy force launched a major ground attack in an attempt to annihilate the remaining Soldiers. As they advanced in two ranks, firing a heavy volume of small arms automatic weapons, throwing hand grenades and firing rocket-propelled grenades. The 27-year-old Cavaiani ordered the remaining platoon members to escape, then tried to hold off the enemy with grenades and a machine gun which he swept back and forth along the two ranks.

Cavaiani played dead as the North Vietnamese took what was nicknamed Hickory Hill, and then hid in the jungle for nearly two weeks before he was captured. He suffered more than 100 shrapnel wounds and bullet holes. Cavaiani spent nearly two years as a POW in solitary confinement for the remainder of the war. He was repatriated to the U.S. in April 1973 and continued to serve most of his 21-year career training Special Forces Soldiers at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Born in Royston, England, in 1943, as Jon Robert Lemmons, to an American and an English woman, he and his mother ventured west in the early 1950s, settling in the tiny farming community of Ballico,

California. He took his stepfather's surname after being adopted, according to a Washington Post article.

Shortly after becoming a naturalized U.S. citizen, in 1969, Cavaiani tried to enlist, but was considered unfit, known as 4F at the time, due to a severe allergy to bee stings. Later he persuaded an Army doctor to find him fit for duty. After more than 20 years of service, he retired in 1990, as a sergeant major.

After he left the Army, Cavaiani attended culinary school and became a farmer, settling with wife Barbara in Columbia, California. He was inducted into the Special Forces Hall of Fame, in 2011.

Cavaiani wasn't one to draw attention to himself by wearing the Medal of Honor in uniform, according to media sources. One Special Forces Soldier served with Cavaiani for more than a year before finding out his NCO held the highest military medal for valor.

When he asked the sergeant major what the story was on the medal, a humble Cavaiani answered simply with, "I was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

However, Cavaiani did draw attention to the Soldiers he had fought with; the ones who didn't return from Southeast Asia. In 2011, Cavaiani and two battle buddies returned to Vietnam, 40 years after the battle in search of the remains of Sgt. John R. Jones, whose body had never been recovered. His remains were found and Jones was buried at Arlington National Cemetery, Virginia, in 2012.

Cavaiani will be interred at Arlington National Cemetery, though a date has not yet been announced. ■



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