



President Barack Obama bestows the Medal of Honor to retired Command Sgt. Maj. Bennie G. Adkins in the East Room of the White House, Sept. 15, 2014. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Bernardo Fuller)

Retired CSM Receives Medal of Honor for Grueling 38-hour Struggle in Jungle

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Retired Command Sgt. Maj. Bennie G. Adkins and Spc. 4 Donald P. Sloat were awarded Medals of Honor by President Barack Obama yesterday during a ceremony in the East Room of the White House. Adkins was present to receive his medal and Sloat's was awarded posthumously. Dr. Bill Sloat, Donald's brother, accepted it on his behalf.

"Normally, the Medal of Honor must be awarded within a few years of the action. But sometimes even the most extraordinary stories can get lost in the fog of war or the passage of time," Obama said. "Yet, when new evidence comes to light, certain actions can be reconsidered for this honor, and it is entirely right and proper that we have done so."

The nation's highest award for valor in combat was presented for Adkins' actions during 38 hours of close-combat fighting against enemy forces March 9–12, 1966, near Camp A Shau, Vietnam.

Adkins, now 80 and a resident of Opelika, Ala., said it was not just his actions that were valorous during that time, but also the actions of his fellow Soldiers.

“What I attribute this to is not my actions, but the actions of the other 16 Americans who were with us in the battle at Camp A Shau, and especially the five who paid the ultimate price,” Adkins said. “All of the 17 Americans who were present in this battle were awarded some type of recognition for valor. Valor was something that was just there with us. All of those 17 American Special Forces Soldiers were wounded, most of us multiple times.”

‘So many acts of bravery we actually don’t have time to talk about all of them’

Adkins was drafted into the Army in December 1956, and eventually volunteered for Special Forces in 1961.

“I had an assignment in a garrison-type unit, and I found out that was not for me,” he said. “I wanted something in the field, and I wanted to be in one of the elite units. At that period in time, it seemed that the Special Forces was the most elite unit. I was not satisfied until I had become a member of that organization.”

Adkins went on to serve three tours in Vietnam. His second tour, from September 1965 to September 1966, saw Adkins serve at Camp A Shau.

According to the battle narrative, Adkins was serving as an intelligence sergeant with Detachment A-102, 5th Special Forces Group, 1st Special Forces, when a large North Vietnamese force attacked Camp A Shau, in the early morning hours of March 9. Adkins and his comrades were bombarded with mortars and white phosphorus, Obama related during the ceremony.

“It was nearly impossible to move without being wounded or killed,” Obama said. “But Bennie ran into enemy fire again and again to retrieve supplies and ammo, to carry the wounded to safety, to man the mortar pit — holding off wave after wave of enemy assaults. Three times, explosions blasted him out of that mortar pit, and three times, he returned.

“I have to be honest. In a battle and daring escape that lasted four days, Bennie performed so many acts of bravery we actually don’t have time to talk about all of them,” Obama said.



Adkins receives the Purple Heart during his tour in Vietnam. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

On the first day, Bennie was helping load a wounded American onto a helicopter. An enemy soldier jumped in the helicopter and aimed his weapon directly at the wounded soldier, preparing to shoot. “Bennie stepped in, shielded his comrade, placing himself directly in the line of fire, helping to save his wounded comrade,” Obama said.

At another point in the battle, Adkins and a few other soldiers were trapped in a mortar pit, “covered in shrapnel and smoking debris,” Obama said. Their only exit was blocked by enemy machine-gun fire. “So, Bennie thought fast,” the president said. “He dug a hole out of the pit and snuck out the other side. As another American escaped through that hole, he was shot in the leg. An enemy soldier charged him, hoping to capture a live POW, and Bennie fired, taking out that enemy and pulling his fellow American to safety.”

“It was just not my time that day,” Adkins said in an interview before the ceremony. “I was blown from the mortar pit on several occasions, and I was fortunate enough

to go outside the camp amongst the enemy and get one of our wounded medevaced out. I also made a trip into the minefield to recover some supplies that were air dropped to us. The bottom line is that it was just not my day to go.”

By the third day of battle, Adkins and a few others had managed to escape into the jungle. “He had cuts and wounds all over his body, but he refused to be evacuated,” Obama said. “When a rescue helicopter arrived, Bennie insisted that others go instead. And so, on the third night, Bennie, wounded and bleeding, found himself with his men up on that jungle hill, exhausted and surrounded, with the enemy closing in. And after all they had been through, as if it weren’t enough, there was something more — you can’t make this up — there in the jungle, they heard the growls of a tiger.”

“It was too late and too high of an altitude for another helicopter, so we had to evade the enemy,” Adkins said. “This was the night that it looked like they had run us down. The North Vietnamese soldiers had us surrounded on a little hilltop, and everything started getting kind of quiet. We could look around and all at once, all we could see were eyes going around us. It was a tiger that stalked us that night. We were all bloody and in this jungle, the tiger stalked us, and the North Vietnamese soldiers were more afraid of the tiger than they were of us. So, they backed off some and we were (able to escape).”

“It turns out that tiger might have been the best thing that happened to Bennie,” Obama said during the ceremony.

Adkins’ wife of 59 years, Mary, said she heard stories of the battle the next day.

“I had two little boys who were just starting school,” she said. “I got up one morning to get them ready for school and when I got up, I turned the TV on. They were telling about a battle on the national news and about Soldiers going through the jungle with a tiger in the middle of them and the Vietnamese, and I don’t know what it was, but something just told me that it was him. I think it was about two days later that I got the telegram saying that he was lost and they hadn’t found

him. About a day or two later, I got another telegram saying that he was found, but they didn’t know what condition he was in. The next one I got said that he was in this hospital and he was doing fine.”

‘It is not a faint memory’

During the 38-hour battle and subsequent 48 hours of escape and evasion, Adkins fought with mortars, machine guns, recoilless rifles, small arms and hand grenades, killing an estimated 135–175 of the enemy, and suffering 18 different wounds.

Despite the 48 years that have passed, Adkins said the memories of what happened in the jungles of Vietnam are still vivid.

“It is not a faint memory,” he said. “I can tell you every man who was there and the five who lost their lives. I can tell you how that happened. It diminishes, but it does not go away. I really feel that most of the Soldiers today experience some degree of [post-traumatic stress]. We have ways of treating this, and my way of treating this was more work, more family and talking about it.”

Adkins, who says he’s a “young 80” now, said the reality of receiving the Medal of Honor has not yet set in.

“It’s something hard to grasp and realize that, during this period of time from World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan, there’s been somewhere between 28 and 30 million who have served in the military,” he said. “To date, we have 79 living recipients of the Medal of Honor. If I can make it . . . I’ll be number 80.”

After his military career, Adkins went on to establish Adkins Accounting Service in Auburn, Ala., and served as CEO for 22 years. He also taught night classes at Southern Union Junior College and Auburn University, all of which he attributed to lessons learned during his Army career.

“The military teaches a competency and a desire to do the best you can at whatever you do, and I carried that on in my teaching and the businesses I operated,” he said. “Whether (Soldiers are) a one-time Soldier or a career Soldier, they should absolutely do the best they can and accomplish the most that they desire to accomplish.” ■



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