



STAFF SGT. YSMAEL VILLEGAS

MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENT

This Month in History: March 20, 1945 — Charging foxholes on the Villa Verde Trail

Compiled by Pablo Villa

Staff Sgt. Ysmael Villegas was known as “Smiley” by family members and friends in his native Casa Blanca, Calif. The nickname spoke of his easygoing, cheerful demeanor. He was described as an ordinary 20-year-old who enjoyed dancing and tending to his lime green 1937 Buick, which he dubbed the Green Hornet, before joining the Army in July 1944. But Villegas’ actions on March 20, 1945, a day before his 21st birthday, proved him to have extraordinary bravery.

He was awarded the Medal of Honor, the nation’s highest honor, for displaying valor in the fight to reclaim the Philippines from Japanese forces during World War II. Villegas was an infantryman with F Company, 127th Infantry Regiment of the 32nd Infantry Division. The 32nd ID — known as the Red Arrow Division and no longer active — is famed for its tenacity in stand-up battles with little or no support. The Red Arrow patch signifies the division’s ability to pierce every line it has encountered, including in such momentous conflicts as the Second Battle of the Marne and the Meuse-Argonne Offensive in World War I.

However, the battle-hardened division was severely tested in the spring of 1945 as it was bogged down on the northern side of the Philippine island of Luzon.

The 32nd ID was trying to secure the Villa Verde Trail, a vital track through the Caraballo Mountains, in the hopes of stifling the Japanese forces anchored in the Cagayan Valley. By March, the division had engaged in more than a month of heavy fighting. That fighting was done alone, as most supporting units were pledged to XIV Corps as it marched toward Manila. The Red Arrow men headed into the mountains to ensure the Japanese couldn’t regroup.

On March 1, Villegas’ squad came under fire from an enemy machinegun nest. Villegas destroyed the nest, an act that resulted in him being awarded the Silver Star. It was merely a prelude to his most noble moment.

On March 20, Villegas was charged with leading a squad up a hill to gain a vantage point along the trail. The squad confronted enemy forces “strongly entrenched in connected caves and foxholes on commanding ground,” according to Villegas’ Medal of Honor citation. Villegas moved boldly

through his ranks, galvanizing his men and imploring them to continue up the hill. The Soldiers pressed forward as bullets whizzed by them and kicked dirt up at their feet. Villegas, displaying a “complete disregard for his own safety,” charged an enemy foxhole, killing the enemy within. Under a hail of gunfire and grenades, Villegas rushed to a second foxhole, nullifying it as well. The enemy gunfire didn’t cease, however, and Villegas charged a third, fourth and fifth foxhole in rapid succession, each time eliminating the enemy within. A sixth enemy entrenchment focused its fire on him, but Villegas didn’t waver and charged toward it. As he neared the position, he was shot and killed.

The bravery Villegas displayed emboldened his men to continue up the hill, sweeping the enemy from the field. American forces eventually secured the trail and took the Cagayan Valley in late June after 119 days of fighting.

Villegas’ surviving family was presented his Medal of Honor by President Harry S. Truman during a ceremony Oct. 19, 1945. Villegas is the first Medal of Honor recipient from Riverside County, Calif., and the first veteran to be interred at Riverside National Cemetery. He is also honored with a statue, a park, a Veterans of Foreign Wars chapter and a middle school that bear his name. ■



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