



# Sgt. Joseph C. Rodriguez

MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENT

## This Month in NCO History: May 21, 1951 — Taking the hill at Munye-Ri, Korea

By Pablo Villa

When he was growing up in San Bernardino, Calif., Sgt. Joseph C. Rodriguez heard constant reminders from his father of what it took for the family to muster through the tough times endured.

“He raised me up saying, ‘Son, you be a man. You be a man. You don’t be afraid to die if it takes it,’” Rodriguez said during an oral history session for the book, *Medal of Honor: Portraits of Valor Beyond the Call of Duty*, first published by Artisan in 2003.

That notion was never more evident than on May 21, 1951. That day, then-Pfc. Rodriguez led a squad from F Company, 17th Infantry Regiment of the 7th Infantry Division, on a mission to take a strategic hill near the small village of Munye-Ri, Korea. That mission resulted in Rodriguez being awarded the nation’s highest honor.

The effort was part of a massive counterattack by U.S. forces to regain ground in the Korean War. But the hill was firmly entrenched with Chinese Communist forces. F Company had attempted to take the hill three times only to be repelled. Then a squad from 2nd Platoon, which included Rodriguez, got the call to attempt another assault up the high ground.

The group immediately came under heavy fire. The hail of gunfire careening down the hill wouldn’t allow the squad to press forward or withdraw. With progress halted and frustration building, Rodriguez seethed. He couldn’t see where the enemy fire was coming from. He only knew it was coming from high up on the hill. His anger over the group’s plight eventually boiled over.

“I felt something had to be done,” Rodriguez said. “I didn’t even think about it. I just did it.”

Rodriguez sprang from his pinned position and sprinted toward the top of the hill. The jaunt was 60 yards into the teeth of five machinegun nests. As bullets sprayed the ground around him, Rodriguez lobbed grenades in the direction of a foxhole to his right. The gunfire coming from that direction ceased. He ran around the left flank and silenced a second foxhole with two more grenades. After returning to his fellow Soldiers’ position to retrieve more grenades, Rodriguez continued his solo charge up the hill. He eliminated two more machinegun nests and, with bullets whizzing past him, Rodriguez sprinted to a fifth emplacement throwing grenades as he went. The gunfire finally fell silent, leaving



Sgt. Joseph C. Rodriguez, left, appeared on “You Bet Your Life,” with his then-fiancée, Rose Aranda, in April 1952. The show was hosted by famed comedian Groucho Marx, right.

the crackling of brush fires as the only sound evident throughout the hill.

Rodriguez’s actions, according to his Medal of Honor citation, “exact[ed] a toll of 15 enemy dead and, as a result of his incredible display of valor, the defense of the opposition was broken, and the enemy routed, and the strategic strongpoint secured. His unflinching courage under fire and inspirational devotion to duty reflect highest credit on himself and uphold the honored traditions of the military service.”

He was subsequently promoted to sergeant and was decorated with the Medal of Honor on Feb. 5, 1952, by President Harry S. Truman during a ceremony in the Rose Garden at the White House.

Rodriguez made a career of the Army, becoming a commissioned officer in 1953 with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. He served more than 30 years, in-

cluding four assignments in Latin America. He retired as a colonel in 1980.

In April 1952, Rodriguez appeared with his then-fiancée, Rose Aranda, on “You Bet Your Life,” a game show hosted by Groucho Marx. Upon hearing the reason Rodriguez made his fateful charge up the hill in Korea, Marx told the couple, “You wiped out a whole army because you got mad? Joe, if I said anything tonight that you resent, I was just being facetious. ... Well, I’m sure glad you’re on our side. Rose, take good care of this fella. My advice is, don’t ever make him mad — he’s liable to wipe out Los Angeles!”

After his retirement, Rodriguez lived with his wife in El Paso, Texas. Rodriguez died there Nov. 1, 2005. He was buried with full military honors at Mountain View Cemetery in San Bernardino. He is survived by his wife and three children. ■

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