



MASTER SGT.

ROY P.
BENAVIDEZ

MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENT

THIS MONTH IN NCO HISTORY: MAY 2, 1968 — A DARING RESCUE THAT RISKED EVERYTHING

By Pablo Villa

Staff Sgt. Roy P. Benavidez had a feeble grip on consciousness when he was pulled out of a rescue helicopter May 2, 1968.

He had just been through a harrowing six-hour firefight, and the danger wasn't over. Benavidez arrived at his forward operating base just west of Loc Ninh, Vietnam, and was placed on the ground amid other bodies that had been retrieved from a battle just miles beyond the Cambodian border. His eyes were caked in blood and tightly shut. He couldn't speak as his jaw had been dislodged by the butt of a North Vietnamese rifle. The rigors of combat left him exhausted and motionless. A doctor pronounced him dead.

Benavidez felt a body bag envelop him. The zipper began its raspy trek up his legs. He couldn't get the doctor's

attention. A fellow Soldier who recognized Benavidez interrupted the doctor, imploring him to check for a heartbeat. The doctor placed his hand on the wounded Soldier's chest. The slight pressure gurgled forth a bit of fortitude from Benavidez's waning strength, and he uncorked what he later called "the luckiest shot" he ever took. He spit in the doctor's face.

Benavidez was rushed into surgery immediately, his ordeal concluded. It was one that involved so many feats of gallantry that nearly 13 years later, before awarding Benavidez — who retired as a master sergeant — the nation's highest military honor, President Ronald Reagan told White House reporters, "you are going to hear something you would not believe if it were a script."

Benavidez's astonishing saga began during his second

tour in Vietnam. He was part of Detachment B-56, 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), 1st Special Forces, which began operations in the country in February 1965.

On that fateful March day, the 33-year-old Benavidez was in a church service when he heard frantic radio chatter from the front. When helicopters from the 240th Assault Helicopter Company returned to the FOB's flight line, their pilots revealed the cause of the frenzied voices. A 12-man reconnaissance team of Green Berets were pinned down by up to 1,500 North Vietnamese infantry soldiers in dense jungle terrain. The enemy had successfully forced the helicopters to abandon an initial rescue effort.

Benavidez immediately acted. He grabbed as many medical supplies as he could and hopped on a helicopter to assist in another extraction attempt. The scene he surveyed from the air was grim — the entire team was wounded, most of them beyond the ability to fight. They were surrounded on all sides by enemy forces that occasionally shot at the chopper Benavidez was riding in. Benavidez directed the pilot to hover over a nearby clearing where he jumped 10 feet into a muggy thicket with the intention of recovering the men.

When he landed on the ground, according to his Medal of Honor citation, Benavidez sprinted 75 meters toward his fellow Soldiers' position as small arms fire pierced the foliage around him. By the time he reached them, Benavidez was wounded in the leg, face and head. Despite his injuries, he took charge, repositioning the Soldiers and directing their fire to facilitate the landing of a rescue helicopter. Benavidez drew the helicopter in with smoke canisters. When it arrived, he carried and dragged half of the wounded team members to the aircraft. He then provided protective fire by running alongside the helicopter as it moved to pick up the remaining team members. With the enemy's fire intensifying, he hurried to recover classified documents on the dead team leader.

When he reached the leader's body, the citation states, Benavidez was severely wounded by enemy fire in the abdomen and grenade fragments in his back. At the same time, the helicopter pilot was mortally wounded, and his aircraft crashed. Although in critical condition because of his multiple wounds, Benavidez secured the classified documents and made his way back to the wreckage, where he pulled his fellow wounded Soldiers out of the overturned aircraft. He positioned the stunned survivors into a defensive perimeter. Under increasing enemy automatic weapons and grenade fire, he moved around the perimeter distributing water and ammunition to the weary men. With the beleaguered group facing a buildup of enemy opposition, Benavidez began calling in tactical air strikes and directed the fire from supporting gunships to suppress the enemy and allow another extraction attempt.

By the time another helicopter was able to land, Benavidez had been directing the fight non-stop for nearly six hours. But the battle still wasn't finished. In fact, it moved closer. After ferrying one group of wounded Soldiers to the helicopter, Benavidez was returning for the others when he was clubbed from behind by an enemy soldier. In the ensuing hand-to-hand combat, Benavidez sustained bayonet wounds to his head and arms before killing his adversary. Enemy fire intensified as he continued carrying the wounded to safety. He killed two enemy soldiers who rushed the craft before returning a third time to the perimeter of the fallen helicopter to secure classified material and bring in the last of the wounded.

Benavidez mustered the last of his strength to board the helicopter, the last man to leave the battlefield. The aircraft was riddled with bullet holes, covered in blood and without any functioning instruments, but the pilot somehow lifted off. Benavidez lost consciousness as soon as it cleared the jungle canopy.

He was awarded the Medal of Honor on Feb. 24, 1981. According to his citation, his efforts "saved the lives of eight men. His fearless personal leadership, tenacious devotion to duty, and extremely valorous actions in the face of overwhelming odds were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service, and reflect the utmost credit on him and the United States Army."

Benavidez was born in Lindenau near Cuero, Texas. He was orphaned at age 7 after his parents died from tuberculosis. Benavidez and his younger brother, Roger, were raised by a grandfather, uncle and aunt in El Campo, Texas.

He attended school sporadically before dropping out at age 15 to work full time to help support the family. Benavidez enlisted in the Texas Army National Guard in 1952 during the Korean War. In June 1955, he switched to active duty. He completed airborne training and was assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where he eventually became a member of the 5th Special Forces Group. He was sent to Vietnam in 1965 as an advisor. During a patrol, he stepped on a land mine. Doctors told Benavidez he would never walk again. After a year in the hospital — and following an unsanctioned rehabilitation regimen — Benavidez walked out of the facility determined to return to Vietnam to help his fellow Soldiers.

Little did he know he would enter the annals of U.S. Army history.

In 1976, Benavidez retired with the rank of master sergeant. He returned to El Campo with his wife and their three children. He devoted his remaining years to the youth of America, speaking to them about the importance of getting an education. His message was simple: "An education is the key to success. Bad habits and bad company will ruin you."

Benavidez died Nov. 29, 1998, at age 63. He was

buried with full honors at Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery.

— Compiled with Pablo Villa



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