



Composite graphic created by the *NCO Journal*.

The Value of Resilience

Building a Better Soldier

By Sgt. Maj. Michael A. Waskewich Jr.

U.S. Army Reserve Legal Command

Nature provides many scientific examples proving the value of resilience. Scientists discovered that the stress from high winds affects the structure of trees and their root systems and helps them grow strong enough to survive environmental challenges. Without this stress, trees eventually collapse under their own weight (Jones, 2012). Adversity, much like Mother Nature, can bring out the best in people as it forces them to adapt to the stressors in their lives.

The story of Congressional Medal of Honor recipient U.S. Army Master Sgt. Roy P. Benavidez, displays the same triumph over adversity that trees show during violent storms. The roadblocks and obstacles placed in front of him would have crushed most people, but instead, using determination and optimism, they galvanized his resolve and made him the courageous leader who risked

everything to save lives in Vietnam (Simkins, 2019).

Studying and utilizing the power of positive thinking, the Army has developed the Ready and Resilient Program to strengthen Soldiers' psychological health to prepare for the rigors of combat and multiple deployments around the world.

History

Benavidez's mother and stepfather raised him and his brother after their father died of tuberculosis when he was only two-years-old. Years later, his mother passed away from the same disease, leaving Benavidez and his brother without biological parents. Benavidez's uncle adopted him and his brother, but due to Benavidez's rebellious nature, he dropped out of school and ran away from home before eventually



Master Sgt. Roy P. Benavidez. (Photo courtesy of USASOC History Office)

joining the Army (Blehm, 2015).

After enlisting, he pushed himself to complete basic training, airborne school, and qualified for Special Forces training. This would be the start of a long and decorated career.

First Tour

During his first tour to Vietnam, Benavidez was point man on a patrol when he stepped on a land mine. The devastating explosion could have easily ended his career as it shattered his backbone and he discovered his doctors were planning to initiate a medical discharge due to his injuries. He immediately pulled himself out of bed and began a grueling journey of recovery, determined to stay in the Army (Blehm, 2015).

The ability of Benavidez to push through his injuries and walk again is remarkable, but walking was just the beginning. Nine months after arriving at Brooke Army Medical Center, he convinced the doctors to tear up his discharge papers and allow him to complete his recovery (Blehm, 2015). His positive

attitude and foundation of resilience enabled him to overcome his injuries. Not only did he return to duty, but he requalified for airborne and the Special Forces (Benavidez, 1991).

Second Tour

During his second tour in Vietnam, 1968, Master Sgt. Benavidez heard the radio call of a Special Forces reconnaissance team requesting an emergency extraction (Schogol, 2019). According to his *Medal of Honor* citation, Benavidez rushed to the flight line and boarded the returning aircraft to assist in extracting the casualties. After arriving to the area, he jumped from the hovering helicopter and ran under fire to the team's location while becoming wounded in the leg, face, and head in the process. He carried or dragged half the team's members to the aircraft for extraction. He then recovered classified documents from the team leader who was killed in action and Benavidez was wounded again by small arms fire in his stomach and suffered grenade shrapnel to his back ("Benavidez, Roy," n.d.).

Benavidez's will never faulted as he aided the wounded after the first helicopter crashed. He called in tactical air strikes and another extraction. He was wounded again by small arms fire in the leg while administering first aid. He then engaged in hand to hand combat with an enemy soldier and was stabbed multiple times by a bayonet before killing the enemy with his own knife. He went on to kill two more enemy soldiers attacking the extraction helicopter and then brought in the remaining wounded ("Benavidez, Roy," n.d.).

“Only then, in extremely serious condition from numerous wounds and loss of blood, did he allow himself to be pulled into the extraction aircraft. Sgt. 'Benevidez' gallant choice to join voluntarily his comrades who were in critical straits, to expose himself constantly to withering enemy fire, and his refusal to be stopped despite numerous severe wounds, saved the lives of at least 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, Roy,” n.d., para. 1)”

“After my last return back to the helicopter when I was boarded on, I was holding my intestines in my hand” (Benavidez, 1991, para. 13).

The heroic actions of Master Sgt. Roy Benavidez are a reflection of not only his courage and grit, but also his optimism and resilient nature. This allowed him to believe, against all odds, he could save his brothers from the jungles of Vietnam as he recalled the inspirational words of his Special Forces instructors, "A positive attitude will carry you further than ability, you can do it" (Benavidez, 1991, para. 8).

This poses the questions: What quality or characteristics did Benavidez have that allowed him to overcome his injuries and jump into battle? Also, how is this type of resilience duplicated in others?

Building Resilience

Dr. Martin Seligman published an article in the *American Psychologist* magazine that discussed building resilience through positive psychology. Trying to replicate resilience, the authors approached the subject from a preventative standpoint as opposed to just a treatment for past traumas. The basis for their research came from the idea that past psychologists strictly looked at the negative effects of adversity for mental health diagnoses and treatments, repairing those who already collapsed under stressors, instead of nurturing their strengths.

“One of the arguments for positive psychology is that during the past half century, psychology has become increasingly focused on mental illness and, as a result, has developed a distorted view of what normal—and exceptional—human experience is like. (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 10)”

Continuing his research at the University of Pennsylvania (UPENN), Dr. Seligman began to look into the strengths of people who never became helpless. The ones who survived the storm and were stronger for it. These new views on resilience led to a revolutionary use of psychology using optimism as a preventative measure against depression, anxiety, and helplessness (Ackerman, 2018). People who persevered in the worst conditions, like Master Sgt. Benavidez, viewed failure and devastation as temporary and changeable. This allowed them to look past the setback towards the future.

Today's Army

By 2009, Soldiers spent years rotating in and out of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The stress associated with constant deployments had serious impacts on the mental fitness of the Army. Senior leaders wanted to find a way for Soldiers to strengthen their mental well-being as part of their total health (Reed & Love, 2009).

Recognizing the need to build mental toughness in the military as a way to remain focused in completing

the mission, former Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Casey met with Dr. Seligman to discuss the implementation of UPENN's resilience program in the military (Mathews, 2019). The Department of Defense sought to embrace the concepts of this program to shape the military culture away from a mental illness model to a psychological health model (Meredith et al., 2011).

In early 2009, UPENN began introducing the Master Resilience Trainer (MRT) Course into the U.S. Army through the Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness (CSF2) program. MRTs equipped leaders with the tools to increase the resilience and psychological fitness of their units (Garamone, 2009). This program has now evolved into today's U.S. Army's Ready and Resilient program. According to the Army's Ready and Resilient website, "Strengthening Soldiers and enhancing personal readiness offers the greatest opportunity to increase unit cohesion and achieve positive outcomes" ("Personal Readiness," 2019, para. 1).



Ready and Resilient (R2) provides training and resources to the Army Family to enhance resilience and optimize performance. (Graphic courtesy of Ready and Resilient Directorate)

Conclusion

Stories of the underdog overcoming great obstacles and setbacks continue to inspire generations around the world. They provide hope in desperate situations and demonstrate the value of never giving up, like Master Sgt. Roy Benavidez. Optimism and resilience strengthens the psychological roots in Soldiers and enables them to withstand the turbulent winds of military life. Today's Army is better equipped, and has more physical and mental tools than any generation before it. ■

References

- Ackerman, C. (2018). What is Positive Psychology and why is it important? *PositivePsychology.com*. Retrieved from <https://positivepsychology.com/what-is-positive-psychology-definition/>
- Benavidez, Roy. (n.d.) *Congressional Medal of Honor Foundation*. Retrieved from <https://themedalofhonor.com/medal-of-honor-recipients/recipients/benavidez-roy-vietnam-war>
- Benavidez, R. P. (1991). Master Sergeant Roy P. Benavidez: The story behind the Medal of Honor recipient. *American Rhetoric*. Retrieved from <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/roybenavidezmedalofhonorspeech.htm>
- Blehm, E. (2015). *Legend: The incredible story of green beret Sergeant Roy Benavidez's heroic mission to rescue a special forces team behind enemy lines*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Garamone, J. (2009). Casey visits Soldiers in resilience training. *Army.mil*. Retrieved from https://www.army.mil/article/30534/casey_visits_soldiers_in_resilience_training
- Jones, D.M. (2012). Strong winds strong roots. *Huff Post*. Retrieved from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/mindfulness-practice_b_1433344
- Mathews, M.D. (2019). Ten years of military positive psychology. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/head-strong/201901/ten-years-military-positive-psychology>
- Meredith, L., Sherbourne, C. D., Gaillot, S., Hansell, L., Ritschard, H., Parker, A. M., & Wrenn, G., (2011). *Promoting psychological resilience in the U.S. military*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4945176/>
- Personal readiness: Key to mission readiness. (2019). *Army.mil*. Retrieved from <https://readyandresilient.army.mil/>
- Reed, J. & Love, S. (2009). Army developing master resiliency training. *Army.mil*. Retrieved from https://www.army.mil/article/25494/army_developing_master_resiliency_training
- Seligman, M., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive Psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*. Retrieved from <http://www.data.unibg.it/dati/corsi/40043/82676-Positive-Psychologie-Aufruf-2000.pdf>
- Schogol, J. (2019). Legendary Green Beret Roy Benavidez is the star of a graphic novel about his Vietnam heroics. *Task and Purpose*. Retrieved from <https://taskandpurpose.com/roy-benavidez-graphic-novel>
- Simkins, J.D. (2019). Graphic novel spotlights actions of Medal of Honor recipient who, even in a body bag, refused to die. *Army Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.armytimes.com/off-duty/military-culture/2019/06/04/graphic-novel-spotlights-actions-of-medal-of-honor-recipient-who-even-in-a-body-bag-refused-to-die/>

*For more information on the Army's R2 Program check out the following link:

<https://readyandresilient.army.mil>

Sgt. Maj. Michael A. Waskewich Jr. is a paralegal in the United States Army. He is currently serving as the G-3/5/7 sergeant major for the United States Army Reserve Legal Command. He previously served as the Professional Development NCO (USAR) for the Office of The Judge Advocate General and Command Paralegal for the Joint Special Operations Command. Waskewich holds a bachelor's degree from American Military University and deployed once in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.



<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

