

NCOs in the American Army: (1945-present) SFC Robert
Lewis Howard.

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Robert Lewis Howard entered the Army from Montgomery, Alabama July 20 1956, at the age of 17. He is a native of Opelika, Alabama. Robert Howard grew up hearing stories of his Father's and uncle's experiences as Paratroopers in the 101st Airborne Division, during World War II. These tales instilled in him a deep sense of patriotism and selfless service which led him to join the military.

Robert L Howard is one of America's most highly decorated soldiers. He wears twenty three (23) ribbons on his chest, the top fourteen (14) are as follows; The Army Achievement Medal, the Joint Service Achievement Medal, the Army Commendation Medal for meritorious achievement (2nd Oak Leaf Cluster), the Army Commendation Medal for Valor (Third Oak Leaf Cluster), the Joint Service Commendation Medal, the Air Medal for flight, the Air Medal for Valor (2nd Oak Leaf Cluster), the Bronze Star for meritorious achievement, the Bronze Star for Valor (3rd Oak Leaf cluster), the Legion of Merit (3rd Oak Leaf Cluster), the Defense Superior Service Medal, the Purple Heart (7th Oak Leaf Cluster), the Silver Star, the Distinguished Service Cross and the Medal of Honor.

Robert Howard served five tours in Viet Nam (three with six month extensions) And is the only soldier in our nation's history to be nominated for the Congressional Medal of Honor three times for three separate actions within a thirteen-month period. Although it can only be awarded once to an individual, men who served with him said he deserved all three. He received a direct appointment from Master Sergeant to 1st Lieutenant in 1969 and was awarded the Medal of Honor by President Richard M. Nixon at the White House in 1971 (Robert L. Howard Tribute)

John Plaster said:

“The day that President Nixon draped the Medal of Honors pale blue ribbon around Howard’s neck, I sat before the TV in my parent’s living room watching the evening news. Coming on top of his previous decorations- the Distinguished Service Cross and multiple Silver and Bronze Stars, plus eight Purple Hearts- Howard’s combat awards exceeded those of Audie Murphy, America’s legendary World War II hero until then, our most highly decorated serviceman. At last, Bob would get his due. I flipped from station to station, but not one of the networks- not CBS, or NBC or ABC could find ten seconds to mention Robert Howard or his indomitable courage. I found nothing about him in the newspapers. Twisted by the antiwar politics of the era, many in the media believed that to recognize a heroic act was to glorify war. They simply chose not to cover the ceremony. It might as well not have happened.” (Plaster 303)

Robert Howard served Thirty six (36) years of active federal service . He retired as a full bird Colonel in 1992, at the time he was the last Viet Nam Special Forces Medal of Honor recipient still on active duty. During Viet Nam, Bob Howard spent most of his five tours in the super secret Military Assistance Command Viet Nam- Studies and Observations Group (MACV-SOG) also known as the Special Operations Group. More specifically, much of his time was served at Forward Operating Base (FOB) 2 at Kontum, South Viet Nam, later designated Command and Control Central, (CCC) States, MACV-SOG also had Command and Control

North, (CCN) Snakes, at Danang, South Viet Nam and Command and Control South (CCS) Tools located at Ban Me Thout, South Viet Nam. These units ran Top Secret classified cross-border operations into Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam. Until 1992, few had ever even heard of this unit. Much of the information surrounding these men's activities was made public that year.

SFC Howard was assigned to Forward Operating Base (FOB) 2 which was later designated Command and Control Central (CCC) at Kontum, South Viet Nam. At no time during its eight years of existence did it exceed more than 60 personnel assigned to it, yet five of its soldiers, (James Kedenberg, Franklin Miller, George Sisler and Fred Zabitosky) also earned the Congressional Medal of Honor. Purple Hearts were awarded at an unparalleled rate. The number of personnel lost was high compared to the number of personnel involved. The actual number of SOG operators lost is difficult to pin down due to them being reported lost in South Viet Nam and not North Viet Nam, Laos, and Cambodia. SFC Howard's Citation reads: Place and date: Republic of Viet Nam, 30 December 1968. It actually occurred in Laos. Today, it is thought to be more than 250 lost with a total of 80 Missing in Action (MIA).

John Plaster stated:

By 1969 the massive enemy effort to interdict SOG personnel tied down approximately 40,000 North Vietnamese Army soldiers-an astounding diversion of troops from South Viet Nam's battlefields. Since only about 50 SOG men were roaming Laos at any one time. This means each individual SOG man was tying down 800 enemy troops, probably

the greatest economy of force in history. (Plaster 191)

With special men lie special techniques and weapons. The weapons used by SOG operators ran the gambit of time, sophistication, ingenuity and nationality. One-zero Bob Graham of Recon Team (RT) Pick used a longbow to eliminate individual enemy silently. China Lake Naval Weapons Center developed a 1000 round backpack with a flexible aircraft style feed for the M-60 Machine Gun which made for awesome firepower. This innovation proved too cumbersome and heavy for soldiers who counted on speed to disengage from the enemy and saw limited use. Some SOG men favored the Chinese RPD machinegun after its barrel and stock had been sawn off. Ammunition for this weapon was fairly easy to acquire on the battlefield as it was used extensively by the NVA. Some SOG men employed a tranquilizer rifle obtained from the group Veterinarian on prisoner snatch missions. One of the more bizarre weapons used was the 13mm Gyrojet rocket pistol. Made of stamped steel with a plastic handle the weapon weighed only a few ounces but delivered a thumb size round that impacted like a .50 caliber. The round was propelled by solid fuel that burned out in about 100 milliseconds, it emitted a whoosh sound when fired. Its impact was impressive but it proved too inaccurate. The CIA supplied "Duckbill" 12 guage shotgun's horizontal buckshot pattern proved a devastating close range backup weapon as well as its awesome psychological effect on the enemy.

Improvisation and ingenuity served the SOG men also. SOG men devised many explosive devices to facilitate their breaking contact with the enemy. Two, six foot lengths of detonation cord ran through common washers would be left across their back trail with a delayed

time fuze made for a nasty surprise to enemy trackers. To deter the use of tracking dogs SOG men carried CS powder in “bug juice” bottles to be deployed on their back trail by simply spraying it. Claymores and grenades could be rigged with time fuze delays to be left as a delaying action. Claymores were also “Daisy chained” to be used as demolition ambushes. One of the more unique items used to break contact with an enemy force about to overrun a recon team was an airhorn.

A SOG mans basic load consisted of 420 rounds for the CAR-15. (A practice still employed today). They carried a .45 caliber 1911-A1 sidearm, with 32 rounds of ammunition. They carried two, 2 ½ lb blocks of C-4 for clearing landing zones. They carried eight M-67 fragmentation grenades, They carried two white phosphorus grenades for marking their positions for close air support and extraction. They carried a suppressed .22 caliber Hi Standard pistol. They carried ten V-40 mini-grenades acquired from Holland. These grenades were golf ball sized and weighed only 3.5 ounces but it unleashed 400 lethal fragments in a five meter circle and could be thrown farther. This barely scratches the surface of what the SOG men carried but you get the idea.

A SOG recon team consisted of three Americans and six Montagnards. The recon teams at Kontum were named after states. A recon team One-One was the team leader with the most experience, rank irrelevant. The One-Two was the Assistant Team Leader and the One-Three was the communications man. Some of their missions included battle Damage Assessment (BDA), Pinpointing enemy locations and calling in air strikes (Prairie Fire and Shining Brass),

prisoner snatch missions (Bright Light), sabotage (Eldest Son). The Hatchet Forces were Quick Reactionary Forces (QRF) for RTs in trouble and were approximately platoon size elements.

SOG recon losses were the greatest in Viet Nam proportionate to number of personnel assigned. 163 SOG men were Killed in Action (KIA) and an additional 80 were Missing in Action. A ratio much higher than any other US ground combat unit. Equally telling is the fact that not one of SOG's cross-border MIA's ever turned up as a POW.

Of SOG's 80 missing Green Berets 25 belonged to ten RTs that disappeared entirely deep in enemy territory;

RT Arizona, 3 Oct 1966

RT Asp, 28 Mar 1968

RT Idaho, 23 May 1968

RT Saw, 2 Mar 1969

RT Kentucky, 31 July 1969

RT Maryland, 3 Nov 1969

RT Rattler, 13 Nov 1969

RT Pennsylvania, 24 Mar 1970

RT Missouri, 5 Oct 1970

RT Asp, 10 May 1971

In addition to these vanished teams, unofficial reports suggest at least another additional 14 US led RTs were overrun and destroyed or their helicopters were lost. Although Bright Light teams

recovered some or all of the bodies and some individual members survived, the numbers are staggering.

SFC Howard received his Medal of Honor while on one such mission. Robert Scherdin was wounded and separated from his RT in Laos. An Emergency radio beacon was detected on a hilltop and a Hatchet Force was dispatched to recover him, dead or alive.

Howard accompanied a 40 man Bright Light platoon, led by Lt. Jim Jerson, to search for the fallen soldier. After bypassing a reinforced NVA company, the platoon began climbing the hill where the beacon signal had originated, almost certain it would be ambushed. It came with a terrible blast, an explosion that badly wounded Jerson and Howard.

When Howard awoke he couldn't focus his eyes, couldn't hear and he ached all over but he could smell something burning. His shredded fingers were almost useless, but he managed to shake off his grogginess and saw a flamethrower wielding NVA who was busy incinerating the dead and wounded from the patrol. Howard grabbed a grenade and pulled himself to his knees. The NVA soldier saw Howard, their eyes locked and they were engaged in a "Mexican standoff" by brandishing the grenade the NVA soldier was convinced to just walk away.

Too injured to stand, Howard crawled 25 yards uphill to Lt Jerson. He was alive! Howard grabbed the Lieutenant but the skin of his hands nearly came off with the effort. Wincing with pain, Howard wedged the Lieutenants feet into the bends of his elbows and began to crawl downhill backwards dragging the Lt. with NVA Passing them enroute to the platoon.

Ten yards downhill, Howard knew they couldn't make it undetected. Howard whispered encouragement to the wounded officer, hid him in some thick brush and crept downhill.

He'd almost made it when an NVA popped up and fired at Howard point-blank.

One of the enemy rounds hit one of Howard's ammo pouches detonating several rounds with such force that Howard was flung several yards downhill landing beside a sobbing soldier hidden behind a tree. Howard told the soldier "Give me your M-16." Instead the young NCO gave him a .45 and 2 magazines. Howard knew he couldn't go back to retrieve Jerson by himself and said "Hey you Son of a bitch, there's no time to pray or cry, it's time to fight or die."

The soldier composed himself and they fought their way to the Lieutenant. The soldier killed four NVA and Howard killed several too, one a mere five feet from him. They both grabbed a leg and started downhill but heavy fire and massed NVA forced them to abandon the Lt again. They went back for him and Howard was shot in the leg but they managed to get back to friendly forces.

Jerson came to and urged Howard to keep the defense going. Howard took stock of their situation. There was a deep fast stream to their rear. They were pinned down but the stream cut their defensive perimeter in half. More manageable for the 20 or so men he had left in the Hatchet Force. He no longer expected to get out alive. By this time 6 hours had passed and the sun was setting. There would be no extraction that night.

Howard pulled the US and Yard leadership together and issued orders for their defense. They had three strobe lights with which to direct Spectre gunships and Howard vowed

to call fire directly on their position if necessary and did so twice during the night. The surrounded Hatchet Force repelled assault after assault.

At around 04:00 AM, Howard was too exhausted to drive on. He had repeatedly adjusted the perimeter and redistributed ammo. He made one final call to Covey overhead and stated. "If you are going to get any of us out of here alive, you'd best do it now." To his surprise that was exactly the plan. Extraction Hueys were inbound and the Spectre gunship overhead began dropping flares.

The unusual night extraction caught the NVA off guard, but it was still a rush to get out before they could react. The first three birds carried out dead and wounded yards. One was so overloaded it had to kick out dead bodies to achieve lift. Howard felt terrible, it reminded him that they hadn't recovered PFC Scherdin, either.

Howard was the last man out and cradled Lt Jerdin in his arms as he died. The recon company commander wrote Howard up for the Medal of Honor-for the third time. This time, there would be no downgrading, no minimizing Howard's Heroism to make a superior look good, just the truth .

I have written this essay to foster a greater respect for those who have gone before us and accomplished great things while remaining the "Quiet Professional."

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Robert L Howard Tribute:

<http://members.cox.net/rlhtribute/>

