

The Medal of Honor and The Heroes That Won It.

by

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OUTLINE

- I. Introduction.
 - A. The research was conducted via the internet. I began my research looking for NCOs that have won the Medal of Honor. I was intrigued with the actual history of the Medal of Honor and how it changed since 1862. I also wanted learn about NCOs that won the Medal of Honor and lived to tell about it. After a lengthy search, I focused my efforts on SGT Alvin York and MSG Roy P. Benavidez.
- II. Body.
 - A. A Short history of the Medal of Honor
 - B. The heroic efforts of Alvin C. York
 - C. The incredible story of Roy P. Benavidez
- III. Closing.
 - A. I have just discussed the Medal of Honor and the heroism displayed by SGT Alvin York and MSG Roy Benavidez.
 - B. Questions?
 - C. All Noncommissioned Officers have a responsibility to preserve the integrity and continually recognize the heroism displayed by those who have won the Congressional Medal of Honor.

The Medal of Honor and the Heroes That Won It

The Congressional Medal of Honor is our nation's highest and most coveted award. Since its inception in December of 1861, The Medal of Honor has been awarded to over 3,400 of Americas bravest Soldier's, Sailors, Airman, Marine's, and Coast Guardsmen. To win the Medal of Honor one must be involved in an actual conflict with an enemy, and distinguish themselves conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of their life above and beyond the call of duty. Unlike The Distinguished Service Cross, The Distinguished Service Medal, and The Silver Star, The Medal of Honor is the nation's only decoration awarded by the President in the name of Congress. Many Medal of Honor recipients made the ultimate sacrifice while earning this coveted medal and received their award posthumously. The Medal of Honor has a rich and proud history and has gone through several changes over the years. Sergeant Alvin C. York and Master Sergeant Roy P. Benavidez are two recipients of The Medal of Honor that stand out amongst their peers and lived to tell about it.

The Congressional Medal of Honor was introduced by Senator James Grimes on 9 December 1861. The Medal of Honor was originally designed for the Navy to recognize Petty Officers and Seaman for gallantry in action and other seaman like qualities during the Civil War. Senator Grimes' bill passed the Senate on 21 December 1861 and was signed by President Lincoln. The bill authorized the production of 200 such medals and the Medal of Honor was born. Two months later, Senator Harry Wilson introduced a similar bill authorizing the production of 2000 similar medals for the Army. President Lincoln signed this legislation into law on 14 July 1862.

The Navy Medal of Honor remains the same today as it did when it was born. The only change has been in the attachment that connects it to the ribbon, and the ribbon itself. Originally

the Navy Medal of Honor was suspended from its red, white, and blue ribbon by an anchor wrapped with a length of rope. The ribbon that held the medal was originally a blue bar on top and 13 red and white stripes running vertically. The 13 represents the original 13 colonies. The color white represents purity and innocence; red represented hardiness, valor and blood; blue signified vigilance, perseverance and justice. The stripes also represented the rays of the sun. The selected Medal of Honor design consisted of an inverted 5-pointed star. On each of the five points was a cluster of laurel leaves to represent victory, mixed with a cluster of oak to represent strength. Surrounding the encircled insignia were 34 stars, equal to the number of stars in the U.S. Flag in 1862. Inside the circle of 34 stars were engraved two images. To the right is the image of Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom and war. On her helmet is perched an owl, representing wisdom. In keeping with the Roman tradition, her left hand holds a bundle of rods and an ax blade, symbolic of authority. The shield in her right hand is the shield of the Union of our states. The reverse side of the medal was inscribed with the words "Personal Valor" above an open area in which the recipient's name could be engraved.

The Army version was struck from the same die as the Navy Medal of Honor. The original Army medal differed only in the emblem that attached it to the same red, white, and blue ribbon of the Navy. Replacing the anchor was an eagle perched on crossed cannon and clutching a saber in its talons. Replacing the words "Personal Valor" on the back of the Medal were the words "The Congress To" with an area to engrave the recipient's name.

The first change in the Army Medal of Honor occurred in 1896. The change resulted after Congress authorized the wearing of a rosette or ribbon in lieu of the Medal in 1895. Following this step, Congress provided for replacement ribbons to recipients whose ribbons had

deteriorated with age. In an effort to distinguish the Medal of Honor from awards being produced and distributed by various veterans' organizations, the new suspension ribbon was introduced.

In 1904 the Gillespie version of the Army Medal of Honor included a simple portrait of a helmeted Goddess of War to replace the Minerva scene. The red, white and blue ribbon was replaced with a light blue ribbon and 13 white stars which we see today. In 1913 the Navy changed their ribbon to like the Army ribbon. In 1919, The Navy offered a second design to the traditional Medal of Honor known as the Tiffany Cross, which is the rarest of all the Medals. The Tiffany Cross was specifically designed to recognize heroism during non-combat operations. The Navy discontinued this medal in 1942 due to a lack of popularity and the fact that it looked like the German Iron Cross. In 1965 the Air Force Medal of Honor was created and it replaced the Minerva portrait with the head of the Statue of Liberty. When the patent on the Medal of Honor first obtained by General Gillespie expired in 1918 Congress intervened to protect the medal's integrity. In 1923 legislation was enacted to prohibit the unauthorized manufacture of medals awarded by the military services. Additional legislation since then has taken steps to further protect the awards presented to our military heroes, and the Medal of Honor in particular. Sadly, some have stooped to the lowest levels by claiming or displaying medals they are not authorized. Misrepresentation of ones' self as a Medal of Honor recipient is a crime punishable by imprisonment.

Though it was not uncommon for Medals of Honor to continue to be pinned to a soldier's tunic during World War II, the practice of draping it around a recipient's neck became increasingly used. For this purpose the modern Medal of Honor was suspended from an 8-sided "pad" bearing 13 white stars, to which the blue silk neck ribbon was attached. The Medal of

Honor is the only United States Military Award that is worn around the neck rather than pinned to the uniform.

Sergeant Alvin C. York is one recipient of the Medal of Honor that stands out amongst his peers. Sergeant York will forever be immortalized for his actions on 18 October 1918 in the Argonne Forest in France, but the events leading up to his heroic efforts are just as intriguing.

Sergeant York was a very religious man, and was very conflicted about taking part in the war effort. Historians claim that Sergeant York tried to avoid serving his country by trying to obtain conscientious objector status. In fact, his Pastor and mother had sent all the paperwork required during his training at Camp Gordon, Georgia. Sergeant York refused to sign the papers and inevitably served honorably and faithfully and became one of our nation's greatest heroes.

During training Sergeant York learned the Squads Right and Squads left formations and became an expert at close order drill. His expertise in marksmanship was well noted from the onset of his training, and he was often used to help train other members of his unit.

Immediately following his training, Sergeant York deployed to Europe with the 82nd Division in April of 1918. His unit arrived in Europe in May and saw limited action leading up to the historic battle in October. Armed with an automatic carbine rifle and Colt 45 pistol, then Corporal York moved out with 16 members of his unit to confront a German machine gun battalion.

The battle started slowly as the German's guns were fixated in the opposite direction of the units advance. The Germans got their machine guns turned around and wiped out all but eight of Corporal York's unit leaving him in charge. He directed the remainder of his men to cover and concealment and sought cover for himself. His men were in a position where they could not return effective fire, leaving Corporal York to fend for himself. One by one, Corporal York

began engaging the German soldiers. Each time a German soldier raised his head to see where Corporal York was positioned he killed them. In the end, Corporal York's use of fire discipline would turn out to be the most effective ever recorded. The German's, after taking heavy casualties and not knowing the size of the element they were facing, surrendered to Corporal York and his men. Corporal York had almost single handedly captured 132 enemy prisoners.

A subsequent investigation on the following morning would reveal that 28 German soldiers had been killed which was the exact amount of rounds that Corporal York had expended. This story has been carefully checked in every possible detail and has been entirely substantiated. On 11 February 1919, a newly promoted Sergeant York originally received the Distinguished Service Cross for his efforts. Finally, on 18 April 1919 Sergeant York received the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Master Sergeant Roy P. Benavidez is another Noncommissioned Officer that disregarded his personal safety, and saved the lives of eight men while sustaining devastating injuries. Master Sergeant (then Staff Sergeant Benavidez), was a member of Detachment B-56, 5th Special Forces Group west of Loc Ninh, Viet Nam.

On the morning of 2 May 1968 a 12 man Special Forces reconnaissance team was inserted by helicopter into a dense jungle area to gather intelligence information about reported large-scale enemy activity. Immediately after insertion, the team sustained withering enemy fire and requested an emergency extraction. Three helicopters were unable to extract the team due to heavy small arms, and anti-aircraft fire. Staff Sergeant Benavidez was at the Forward Operating Base monitoring the activity on the radio. When the aircraft returned to download wounded members of the aircraft crew Staff Sergeant Benavidez volunteered to assist in another extraction attempt. SSG Benavidez realized that all of the men were either dead or wounded and could not

make their way to the extraction sight. He directed the aircraft to a nearby clearing where he jumped from the hovering aircraft. He then ran approximately 75 meters under heavy enemy fire, and sustained severe injuries to his right leg, face, and head before reaching the crippled team. Despite his severe wounds, he took charge and repositioned the injured team members and directed their fire to facilitate the landing of an extraction aircraft. SSG Benavidez through smoke canisters to direct the aircraft to the team's position. Under intense enemy fire, he dragged half of the wounded team members to the awaiting aircraft, and then ran alongside the aircraft directing fire to reach the remaining team members. As the enemy's fire intensified, he hurried to recover the body and classified documents on the dead team leader. When he reached the leader's body, Sergeant Benavidez was severely wounded by small arms fire in the abdomen and grenade fragments in his back. The aircraft pilot was mortally wounded, and his helicopter crashed.

Staff Sergeant Benavidez secured the classified documents and made his way back to the wreckage, where he aided the wounded out of the overturned aircraft, and gathered the stunned survivors into a defensive perimeter. He moved around the perimeter distributing water and ammunition to his weary men. Facing a buildup of enemy opposition with a beleaguered team, Staff Sergeant Benavidez began calling in tactical air strikes and directed the fire from supporting gun ships to suppress the enemy's fire to permit another extraction attempt. He was wounded again in his thigh by small arms fire while administering first aid to a wounded team member just before another extraction helicopter was able to land. His indomitable spirit kept him going as he began to ferry his comrades to the craft. On his second trip with the wounded, he was clubbed with additional wounds to his head and arms before killing his adversary with his knife. He then continued under devastating fire to carry the wounded to the helicopter. Upon reaching the aircraft, he spotted and killed 2 enemy soldiers who were rushing the craft from an

angle that prevented the aircraft door gunner from firing upon them. With little strength remaining, he made one last trip to the perimeter to ensure that all classified material had been collected or destroyed, and to bring in the remaining wounded. Only then, in extremely serious condition from numerous wounds and loss of blood, did he allow himself to be pulled into the extraction aircraft. After returning to the Forward Operating Base Staff Sergeant Benavidez was being placed in a body bag when he spit in a doctors face to signify that he was still alive.

SSG Benavidez originally received the Distinguished Service Cross for these actions, and did not receive the Medal of Honor until 1981, when it was presented to him by President Reagan. Roy Benavidez died in 1998, and has since had a Navy Ship, The Special Operations Center at Fort Bragg, and several elementary schools named in his honor.

To date 3,456 Medals of Honor have been awarded. Nineteen have been awarded to double recipients. Until 1942 and World War II, only enlisted were authorized to receive the Medal of Honor, but later changes allowed for past deeds to be re-nominated. There are only 129 living recipients of the Medal of Honor, and that number is dwindling. As Noncommissioned Officers it is our solemn responsibility to preserve the integrity of this coveted award and to continuously recognize the heroism of those who have earned it. While Alvin York and Roy Benavidez were mentioned, every recipient of this award is worthy of recognition.

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