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The Story Behind the Medal of Honor Recipient

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Thank you. Thank you very much. *Muchas gracias*, like they say in Spanish, in German *danke schon*, in Japanese *arigato ne*, and in French *merci beaucoup*. Thank you very much.

I don't speak those languages fluently but I never get lost in those countries if ever I go there. Thank you very much to the Million Dollar Round Table for inviting me to come and be along with these other eloquent speakers.

I come from a little town named Cuero, Texas. I was born there, the "turkey capital of the world." After the death of my mother and father, at an early age, my brother and I were adopted by an aunt and uncle. We moved to El Campo, Texas, [a] town southwest of Houston, about an hour and a half. I was raised there. I went to school there. I worked at odd jobs there -- shined shoes, sold papers, picked cottons. And like a fool, I dropped out of school and I ran away from home. I'm not proud of that.



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I needed to learn a skill. I needed an education. My adoptive father would tell me, "Son, an education and a diploma is the key to success. Bad habits and bad company will ruin you." Well, I was too old to go back to school and did not want to return back, so I joined the Texas National Guard. And I liked what I saw in men in uniform. And I qualified to join the regular army. I needed to have education and learn a skill. So I was accepted into the regular army and I heard about the Airborne. I heard about that extra pay that you get for jumping out of airplanes. So, I qualified to go to jump school at Fort Benning, Georgia but the darn recruiters never told me what the training was like. For every mistake that you make, you do pushups; and I can honestly tell you, ladies and gentlemen, I'm one of the guys that helped to put Georgia into South Carolina doing pushups.

Well, I finished my training. I got assigned to a well-known unit at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, the 82nd Airborne Division. I liked -- thank you. Airborne all the way. I like that. And so, after awhile there, [I] heard about the Special Forces. You know it as the Green Berets. And they were coming up. So I qualified to join the Special Forces. Course, I'm a linguist. We in the Special Forces are trained to operate deep behind enemy lines with little or no support at all. We are trained in five specialties. I'm trained in three: operations and intelligence, where I learned oceanography, meteorology, and photography. I'm an interrogator and I'm a linguist. I'm trained in light and heavy weapons and cross-trained as a medic.

I've been all over the world: the Far East, Europe, South and Central America, and two tours in Vietnam. I was assigned to Berlin, in Germany, and I have declared one time that I was the only the Hispanic-American that could speak German with a southern accent...Danke schon. So, I came back and retrained at Fort Bragg, and Vietnam was brewing up.

In 1965, I was sent to Vietnam as an advisor to [a] Vietnamese infantry unit. After a short period of time there, I stepped on a mine. I woke up in the Philippine Islands, in Clark Air Force Base. I was paralyzed from the waist down. I was declared never to walk again. I was transferred to Fort Sam, Houston, Texas, Beach Pavilion. The doctors were initiating my medical discharge papers, but at night I would slip out of bed and crawl to a wall using my elbows and my chin. My back would just be killing me and I'd be crying, but I get to the wall and I set myself against the wall and I'd back myself up against the wall and I'd stand there -- like Kaw-Liga, the Indian. I'd stand and move my toes, right and left...every single chance I got -- I got. And I wanted to walk -- I wanted to go back to Vietnam because of what the news media was saying about us: that our presence was not needed there; they're burning the flag....



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And I saw a lot of other patients coming back, limbs missing. I wanted to go back. I was determined 'cause I remember what I was taught at jump school. That old Master Sergeant would tell me, "Benavidez, quitters never win and winners never quit. What are you?" [I said], "I'm a winner." And I remember in my Special Forces -- thank you. And I remember in my Special Forces training, one of the training missions that I was on, I remembered that my leader would tell me, "Faith, determination, and a positive attitude. A positive attitude will carry you further than ability. You can do it, Benavidez. You can do it." I never forgot those three words. Never. So there I was at night: slip out of bed; the nurses would catch me sometimes; they would chew me out, give me a pill, sleeping pill, put me to sleep. They would tell the doctors in the morning. I was determined to walk.

Nine months later, here comes my medical discharge papers. And I told the doctor, "Doctor, look what I can do." He said, "Sergeant, I'm sorry. Even if you can stand up, you'll never be able to walk." I jumped out of bed and I stood up right before him. My back was hurting, aching, and I was crying. And I moved just a little bit; the doctor says, "Benavidez, if you walked out of this room, I'll tear these papers up." I walked out of that ward at Beach Pavilion. I walked out with a limp. I went back to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. I started my therapy again, running 5 miles or 10 miles a day, doing 50 to 100 pushups; and I made three parachute jumps in one day. I was ready to go back to Vietnam, physically and mentally ready to go back.

My orders were to go to Central America as an advisor but being a non-commissioned officer and knowing some of the good officers in the right places, my orders were diverted. So...I went back to Vietnam in 1968.

The latter part of April, I was instructed, my buddy and I, to gather intelligent [intelligence] information behind enemy lines. And after two days on the ground, my buddy was shot through the eye, the back, the legs. Our mission was complete but I didn't want to leave my buddy behind. I called in for an extraction helicopter to come and get us out. They came in with the McGuire rig. The McGuire rig is nothing but a piece of rope, nylon rope, to hook. In that case, it was two ropes. We hooked on -- the enemy was firing at us. We pulled up -- going up through the canopy of the jungle, our ropes started to twist and rub. You know nylon, it burns when it rubs.

As we cleared the canopy, our ropes were completely twisted and rubbing. And there was a non-commissioned officer that looked out of the helicopter -- he was riding [unclear]. And when he saw those two ropes burning, he immediately tied himself with a piece of rope around his waist and he pulled himself out of the helicopter and undid those two ropes, separated them.



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That's dedication. That's love of fellow man and country. I'll never forget that man. And the enemy was still firing at us but they never shot us. We landed -- We landed in a safe spot. My buddy was taken to the hospital. Shortly, thereafter, he expired.

I was in another station area waiting for the next assignment when I heard on the radio something like a popcorn machine. Then I heard a voice, "Get us out of here! Get us out of here! Come and get us out! Quick! ASAP!" I asked the radio operator, "Who are those?" He said, "I do not know. They hadn't given us any call signs." And I saw some helicopter pilot running to the flight line, scrambling. I ran right behind him. We saw a helicopter coming in to land and had a door gunner slumped over the weapon. When the helicopter landed, I unstrapped the door gunner. [Spec. 4] Michael Craig, 19 years old. We just celebrated his 19th birthday in March. I cradled him in my arms and his last words were, "My God, my mother and father."

I asked the pilot, "Who are the people on the ground?" He said, "Hey, there's that black NCO, the non-commissioned officer [that] saved your life the other day, remember?" I said, "[Sergeant First Class] Leroy Wright." Leroy always got picked for some particular assignments, him and [Staff Sergeant Lloyd] Mousseau and [Spec. 4 Brian] O'Connor. So it was an instant reaction. I saw a bag of medical supplies and picked it up, went over to my helicopter, got on the helicopter. We got on with the forward air controller to guide us in. He says, "You can't go in there. You can't go in. It is too hot." Little did I know that I was going to spend six hours in hell.

You heard what what the President read at the citation of how I earned the Medal of Honor. But he didn't tell you of what I went through when I engaged in a hand-to-hand combat. I was hit in the mouth with the butt of a weapon. My jaws were locked. After my last return back to the helicopter when I was boarded on, I was holding my intestines in my hand.

We lifted up. The helicopter had over its payload. Blood was running on both sides of the helicopter. When we landed, they locked me in a staging area and started unloading, started identifying the bodies. They found out I loaded three dead enemy soldiers in that helicopter. I didn't want to leave anybody behind. My mission -- My mission was to recover the classified materials so if anybody had it, he was on the helicopter.

So, they left -- they left the three enemy soldiers on the side and because I sort of looked oriental, they thought I was one of them so they let me lay right next to them; and they were putting us in body bags. And I remember my feet being lifted, and I was inserted into the body bag, and I hear that zipper coming up and I was "Oh, my God, no, no." My eyes were



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shut because I had blood all over my face. My eyes and the blood had dried up in my eyelids. And I couldn't talk because my jaws were locked. And I could hear that zipper coming up, coming up. And one of my buddies was doing the Mexican hat dance and he was yelling at the doctor, "That's Roy, that's Roy Benavidez!" Doctor said, "Sorry, there's nothing I can do for him." Oh my God. The zipper is just coming up -- I was trying to wiggle in my own blood. And finally -- I found out later -- Jerry Cottingham made that doctor at least to feel my heartbeat. When I felt that hand on my chest, I made the luckiest shot I ever made in my life. I spit in the doctor's face. So the doctor said, "I think he'll make it."

So, I -- I was cleaned up, put on a helicopter alongside with my buddy -- one of the guys that I had saved. We got airborne. I just said to myself, "Hold on buddy. Just hold on. We're going to get some medical attention." And his grip tightened up on me. And then he let go. I was "Oh God, why do you put me through this test? Why? You helped me get these men out, save[d] them, saved this material; and now you take them away from me. Why?" And I was crying. I was moving so much that the co-pilot, he happened to look back and he thought that I was gasping for air so he gets out of his seat, get[s] his bayonet out, and he was going to do a trache on me, and I am about to kick him out of the helicopter. That's just too much for one day.

So I -- we landed at a hospital at --at Long Binh and I was wheeled into the operating room, and as I was being lifted to my operating table, I saw this nurse on her hands and knees, crying, yelling, asking God. "Why do you this to these men? Why?" Just crying. And I turned a little bit to my left, I saw in the other operating table a man that had both legs and both arms missing. I passed out.

I woke up in the ward. One of my buddies was laying next to me. We were so bandaged up. We couldn't talk. We used to wiggle our toes to make sure that we were still alive. After a short while, my buddy was transferred from there and I thought that he had died.

I was transferred to Japan, Tachikawa. In that airplane that I was flying in MedEvac, we lost two men. And I remember this nurse kept yelling at me: "Benavidez, you're not going to die on me. I'm going to pinch you every time you close your eyes. I am going to pinch you. I am going to pinch you." Boy, she kept pinching me. When I got to Tachikawa, when I got to Japan, and they wheeled me into the operating room, they just rolled me again. I remember the doctor -- I heard him say, "What in the world happened to you?" I had blue spots, red spots all over me. And I said, "That lady kept pinching me up there."



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So after -- I went to back Fort Sam, Houston, Beach Pavilion and I stayed in that hospital almost a year. I continued with my career. Then I was awarded with a medal. I was dedicating myself to come and speak to schools, to civic groups, to help anyone that I could help. My life was spared for a reason and I hope that is a good reason.

A lot of people call me a hero. I appreciate the title but the real heroes are the ones that gave their life for this country. The real heroes are our wives and our mothers. Above all, the heroes are the ones that are laying in those hospitals, disabled for life in those hospital beds. But the real heroes are the future leaders of our country, the students that are staying in school and learning to say no drugs. Those are our real heroes.

You know, there's a saying among us veterans: "For those who have fought for it, life has a special flavor the protected will never know." You have never lived 'til you almost died. And it is us veterans that pray for peace, most of all, especially the wounded because we have to suffer the wounds of war.¹

I'm asked hundreds of times: Would you do it over again? In my 25 years in the military, I feel like I've been overpaid for the service to my country. There will never be enough paper to print the money nor enough gold in Fort Knox for me to have to keep from doing what I did. I'm proud to be an American; and even prouder -- and I'm even prouder that I've earned the privilege to wear the Green Beret. I live by the motto of "Duty, Honor, Country."²

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much. Thank you.

God bless you and God bless America.

¹ Echoes of General Douglas MacArthur's refrain in his Thayer Award Acceptance Address: "...the soldier, above all other people, prays for peace, for he must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war."

² Ibid.