

Bush Awards Medal of Honor to Vietnam War Hero

By Linda D. Kozaryn
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, July 8, 2002 -- Forty years ago, Army Capt. Humbert Roque 'Rocky' Versace wanted to become a priest and work with Vietnamese orphans. He'd been accepted into a seminary, but his dream was not to be fulfilled.

Two weeks before he was due to return home, Versace, 27, was captured on Oct. 29, 1963, by Viet Cong guerrillas who spent the next two years torturing and trying to brainwash him. In return, he mounted four escape attempts, ridiculed his interrogators, swore at them in three languages and confounded them as best he could, according to two U.S. soldiers captured with him.

The witnesses said the unbroken Versace sang "God Bless America" at the top of his lungs the night before he was executed on Sept. 26, 1965. His remains have never been recovered.

Nominations starting in 1969 to award Versace the Medal of Honor failed; he received the Silver Star posthumously instead. Language added by Congress in the 2002 Defense Authorization Act ended the standoff and authorized the award of the nation's highest military decoration for combat valor.

Today, President Bush and the nation recognized Versace for his courage and defiance. Bush said the Army captain was "a soldier's soldier, a West Point graduate, a Green Beret who lived and breathed the code of duty, and honor and country.

"Last Tuesday would have been Rocky's 65th birthday," the president said. "So today, we award Rocky the first Medal of Honor given to an Army POW for actions taken during captivity in Southeast Asia.

"In his defiance and later his death," Bush said, "he set an example of extraordinary dedication that changed the lives of his fellow soldiers who saw it firsthand. His story echoes across the years, reminding us of liberty's high price and of the noble passion that caused one good man to pay that price in full."

Versace's brother Steve accepted the award during a White House ceremony witnessed by family members and many of the friends and supporters who had worked for years to have Versace's Silver Star upgraded.



(Click photo for screen-resolution image.)

President Bush awarded the Medal of Honor to Army Capt. Humbert R. Versace posthumously in a ceremony July 8, 2002, at the White House. Versace, known to many as "Rocky," was executed by the Viet Cong in September 1965 while a prisoner of war in Vietnam. The Medal of Honor recognizes his valor in combat and during two years of captivity. USA Photo. ([Photos of Army ceremony](#) to induct Capt. Versace into the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes available.)

Versace grew up in Norfolk and Alexandria, Va., and attended Gonzaga College High School. He graduated from West Point in 1959 and became a member of the Ranger Hall of Fame at Fort Benning, Ga., and a member of Army Special Forces.

Bush said a fellow soldier recalled that Versace "was the kind of person you only had to know a few weeks before you felt like you'd known him for years." As an intelligence adviser in the Mekong Delta, he befriended many local citizens. "He had that kind of personality," the president said.

"One of Rocky's superiors said that the term 'gung-ho' fit him perfectly," he noted. "Others remember his strong sense of moral purpose and unbending belief in his principles. As his brother Steve once recalled, if he thought he was right, he was a pain in the neck. If he knew he was right, he was absolutely atrocious."

The Viet Cong tortured prisoners to persuade them to confess to phony crimes. Versace gave only his name, rank and serial number as required by the Geneva Convention. "He cited the treaty chapter and verse over and over again," the president said. "He was fluent in English, French and Vietnamese and would tell his guards to go to hell in all three."

Versace knew what he was doing, Bush said. "By focusing his captors' anger on him, he made life a measure more tolerable for his fellow prisoners, who looked to him as a role model of principled resistance."

Related Sites of Interest:

- President Awards Posthumous Medal of Honor to Vietnam War Hero: [Remarks by the President at Presentation of Medal of Honor](#), July 8, 2002
- Army News Service article: [Vietnam War POW gets Medal of Honor](#)
- U.S. Army Center for Military History [Medal of Honor](#) Web site
- Capt. Versace [Medal of Honor Citation](#)

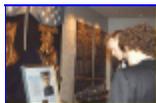


Army Secretary Thomas E. White gazes at the cased Medal of Honor presented by President Bush to Stephen Versace (right) on behalf of his brother, Capt. Humbert Roque "Rocky" Versace, who was cited for extraordinary heroism while a prisoner of the Viet Cong from October 1963 until the guerrillas executed him in September 1965 after failing to break or brainwash him. Bush presented the award at the White House July 8, 2002, and Army officials inducted the captain into the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes the following day. Photo by Staff Sgt. Marcia T. Hart, USA. (Click photo for screen-resolution image; [high-resolution image](#) available.)



Brothers of Capt. Humbert Roque Versace uncover his Medal of Honor plaque during an induction ceremony into the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes on July 9, 2002. "Rocky" Versace was cited for extraordinary heroism while a prisoner of the Viet Cong from October 1963 until the guerrillas executed him in September 1965 after failing to break or brainwash him. President Bush presented the award to Versace's family at the White House July 8. Photo by Staff Sgt. Marcia T. Hart, USA. (Click photo for screen-resolution image; [high-resolution image](#) available.)

Davi Rios, 16, reads a plaque that tells of his uncle's heroism during the Vietnam



War. Capt. Humbert Roque Versace, the nation's newest Medal of Honor recipient, was inducted into the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes July 9, 2002. "Rocky" Versace was cited for extraordinary heroism while a prisoner of the Viet Cong from October 1963 until the guerrillas executed him in September 1965 after failing to break or brainwash him. President Bush presented the award to Versace's family at the White House July 8. Photo by Staff Sgt. Marcia T. Hart, USA. (Click photo for screen-resolution image; [high-resolution image](#) available.)

VERSACE, HUMBERT R.

The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress, March 3, 1863, has awarded in the name of The Congress the Medal of Honor to

CAPTAIN HUMBERT R. VERSACE UNITED STATES ARMY

for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty:

Captain Humbert R. Versace distinguished himself by extraordinary heroism during the period of 29 October 1963 to 26 September 1965, while serving as S-2 Advisor, Military Assistance Advisory Group, Detachment 52, Ca Mau, Republic of Vietnam. While accompanying a Civilian Irregular Defense Group patrol engaged in combat operations in Thoi Binh District, An Xuyen Province, Captain Versace and the patrol came under sudden and intense mortar, automatic weapons, and small arms fire from elements of a heavily armed enemy battalion. As the battle raged, Captain Versace, although severely wounded in the knee and back by hostile fire, fought valiantly and continued to engage enemy targets. Weakened by his wounds and fatigued by the fierce firefight, Captain Versace stubbornly resisted capture by the over-powering Viet Cong force with the last full measure of his strength and ammunition. Taken prisoner by the Viet Cong, he exemplified the tenets of the Code of Conduct from the time he entered into Prisoner of War status. Captain Versace assumed command of his fellow American soldiers, scorned the enemy's exhaustive interrogation and indoctrination efforts, and made three unsuccessful attempts to escape, despite his weakened condition which was brought about by his wounds and the extreme privation and hardships he was forced to endure. During his captivity, Captain Versace was segregated in an isolated prisoner of war cage, manacled in irons for prolonged periods of time, and placed on extremely reduced ration. The enemy was unable to break his indomitable will, his faith in God, and his trust in the United States of America. Captain Versace, an American fighting man who epitomized the principles of his country and the Code of Conduct, was executed by the Viet Cong on 26 September 1965. Captain Versace's gallant actions in close contact with an enemy force and unyielding courage and bravery while a prisoner of war are in the highest traditions of the military service and reflect the utmost credit upon himself and the United States Army.