

President Awards Posthumous Medal of Honor to Vietnam War Hero Remarks by the President at Presentation of Medal of Honor The East Room

3:07 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Good afternoon, and welcome to the White House. It's a -- this is a special occasion. I am honored to be a part of the gathering as we pay tribute to a true American patriot, and a hero, Captain Humbert "Rocky" Versace.

Nearly four decades ago, his courage and defiance while being held captive in Vietnam cost him his life. Today it is my great privilege to recognize his extraordinary sacrifices by awarding him the Medal of Honor.

I appreciate Secretary Anthony Principi, the Secretary from the Department of Veteran Affairs, for being here. Thank you for coming, Tony. I appreciate Senator George Allen and Congressman Jim Moran. I want to thank Paul Wolfowitz, the Deputy Secretary of Defense; and General Pete Pace, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs; Army General Eric Shinseki -- thank you for coming, sir. I appreciate David Hicks being here. He's the Deputy Chief of Chaplains for the United States Army.

I want to thank the entire Versace family for coming -- three brothers and a lot of relatives. Brothers, Dick and Mike and Steve, who's up here on the stage with me today. I appreciate the classmates and friends and supporters of Rocky for coming. I also want to thank the previous Medal of Honor recipients who are here with us today. That would be Harvey Barnum and Brian Thacker and Roger Donlon. Thank you all for coming.

Rocky grew up in this area and attended Gonzaga College High School, right here in Washington, D.C. One of his fellow soldiers recalled that Rocky was the kind of person you only had to know a few weeks before you felt like you'd known him for years. Serving as an intelligence advisor in the Mekong Delta, he quickly befriended many of the local citizens. He had that kind of personality. During his time there he was accepted into the seminary, with an eye toward eventually returning to Vietnam to be able to work with orphans.

Rocky was also a soldier's soldier -- a West Point graduate, a Green Beret, who lived and breathed the code of duty and honor and country. One of Rocky's superiors said that the term "gung-ho" fit him perfectly. 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." (Laughter.) "If he knew he was right, he was absolutely atrocious." (Laughter.)

When Rocky completed his one-year tour of duty, he volunteered for another tour. And two weeks before his time was up, on October the 29th, 1963, he set out with several companies of South Vietnamese troops, planning to take out a Viet Cong command post. It was a daring mission, and an unusually dangerous one for someone so close to going home to volunteer for.

After some initial successes, a vastly larger Viet Kong force ambushed and overran Rocky's unit. Under siege and suffering from multiple bullet wounds, Rocky kept providing covering fire so that friendly forces could withdraw from the killing zone.

Eventually, he and two other Americans, Lieutenant Nick Rowe and Sergeant Dan Pitzer, were captured, bound and forced to walk barefoot to a prison camp deep within the jungle. For much of the next two years, their home would be bamboo cages, six feet long, two feet wide, and three feet high. They were given little to eat, and little protection against the elements. On nights when their netting was taken away, so many mosquitos would swarm their



Steve Versace holds up the Medal of Honor that President George W. Bush presented to him on the behalf of his brother, Army Captain Humbert "Rocky" Versace, during a ceremony in the East Room, Monday, July 8. Executed in a POW camp in Vietnam, Captain Versace is the first serviceman awarded the medal for bravery as a prisoner of war. White House photo by Eric Draper.

shackled feet it looked like they were wearing black socks.

The point was not merely to physically torture the prisoners, but also to persuade them to confess to phony crimes and use their confessions for propaganda. But Rocky's captors clearly had no idea who they were dealing with. Four times he tried to escape, the first time crawling on his stomach because his leg injuries prevented him from walking. He insisted on giving no more information than required by the Geneva Convention; and cited the treaty, chapter and verse, over and over again.

He was fluent in English, French and Vietnamese, and would tell his guards to go to hell in all three. Eventually the Viet Cong stopped using French and Vietnamese in their indoctrination sessions, because they didn't want the sentries or the villagers to listen to Rocky's effective rebuttals to their propaganda. Rocky knew precisely what he was doing. 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.

Eventually the Viet Cong separated Rocky from the other prisoners. Yet even in separation, he continued to inspire them. The last time they heard his voice, he was singing "God Bless America" at the top of his lungs.

On September the 26th, 1965, Rocky's struggle ended in his execution. In his too short life, he traveled to a distant land to bring the hope of freedom to the people he never met. In his defiance and later his death, 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.

Last Tuesday would have been Rocky's 65th birthday. So today, we award Rocky -- Rocky Versace -- the first Medal of Honor given to an Army POW for actions taken during captivity in Southeast Asia. We thank his family for so great a sacrifice. And we commit our country to always remember what Rocky gave -- to his fellow prisoners, to the people of Vietnam, and to the cause of freedom.

Now, Major, please read the citation.

(The citation is read, and the Medal is presented.) (Applause.)

END 3:15 P.M. EDT