

Vietnam War POW gets Medal of Honor

by Joe Burlas

WASHINGTON (Army News Service, July 9, 2002) -- President George W. Bush honored the memory and valiant actions of an American prisoner of war from the Vietnam conflict with a posthumous Medal of Honor during a White House ceremony July 8.



Secretary of the Army Thomas E. White and Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric K. Shinseki inducted the newest Medal of Honor winner, Capt. Humbert Roque "Rocky" Versace, into the Pentagon Hall of Heroes in a simple ceremony July 9.

Bush acknowledged that the award was the first time a Medal of Honor has been given to a Vietnam-era POW for actions that occurred while in captivity.

"In his too short life, he traveled to a distant land to bring the hope of freedom to people he never met," Bush said. "In his defiance and later 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 the price in full."

Capt. Humbert Roque "Rocky" Versace (Click on the photo to view a higher resolution photo)

Wounded and captured by Viet Cong forces while accompanying a Republic of Vietnam Army operation in the Mekong Delta on Oct. 29, 1963, Versace made his first attempt to escape three weeks later. Due to wounds in the back and one knee, he could only crawl. The military intelligence officer and 1959 U.S. Military Academy graduate didn't make it far into the surrounding jungle before being recaptured.

The award citation credited Versace for scorning the enemy's exhaustive interrogation and indoctrination efforts despite isolation, privation, hardships and extremely reduced rations. "The enemy was unable to break his indomitable will, his faith in God and his trust in the United States of America," stated the citation.

"(Versace) was fluent in English, French and Vietnamese, and he would tell his guards to go to hell in all three," Bush said. "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."

During interrogation sessions, Versace stuck to giving just his name, rank, social security number and date of birth as required by the Geneva Convention, according to fellow prisoners. Often he would divert the enemy's inhumane treatment of fellow prisoners onto himself, they recalled.

Versace made two other attempts to escape before his Viet Cong captors executed him on Sept. 26, 1965. The last time his fellow prisoners heard Versace, he was singing "God Bless America" at the top of his lungs just prior to his execution, Bush said.

"First and foremost, we are here today to recognize Rocky's example as the model of adherence

to the Code of Conduct; as the model of physical and moral courage; as the model of complete selflessness; as the model of one who never broke faith with God and country -- regardless of the cost," White said at the Pentagon ceremony. "But our presence here today is also a tribute to the many in his family, and in our Army family, who never broke faith with Rocky."

Shinseki pointed out that Versace's heroism spanned almost two years, whereas most Medal of Honor recipients are honored for actions lasting just a moments, hours or days.

"His is a story of a remarkable, unyielding spirit and an uncompromising fierce defiance -- the courage never to submit or yield," Shinseki said. "It is the story of a soldier who, in the worst of circumstances, demonstrated all that is best about our profession and our values. It is a story about a man subjected to the most relentless atrocities who persevered -- and in doing so, revealed an unwavering strength of character that inspired all who witnessed his triumph over his tormentors."

First Lt. Nick Rowe, the only soldier to successfully escape from captivity during the Vietnam War, witnessed Versace's unyielding determination and horrific hardship from beatings and other forms of torture as a fellow prisoner. After his escape, Rowe submitted Versace for a Medal of Honor. It was downgraded to a Silver Star in the belief that Medal of Honor qualifications required recipients to have demonstrated uncommon valor as a part of an ongoing combat operation.

The Army Special Operations community resubmitted Versace's Medal of Honor recommendation several years ago, White said. Upon review by the White House last year, it was determined that Versace's actions as POW did in fact meet the medal's requirements for a service member "who distinguishes himself or herself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his or her life above and beyond the call of duty while engaged in action against an enemy of the United States."

To date, 245 Medals of Honor have been awarded to service members for actions during the Vietnam War. Of that number, 159 have gone to Army recipients. Including Versace, eight Vietnam POWs received the nation's highest award for valor -- the others earned them for heroic actions that occurred before their captivity.