

The Humble Knight: Colonel Robert L. Howard

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By

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In 1968 Colonel Robert L. Howard was a 30-year-old sergeant first class and the most physically fit man on our compound. Broad-chested, solid as a lumberjack and mentally tough, he cut an imposing presence. I was among the lucky few Army Special Forces soldiers to have served with Bob Howard in our 60-man Recon Company at Command and Control Central, a top secret Green Beret unit that ran covert missions behind enemy lines. As an element of the secretive Studies and Observations Group – SOG – we did our best to recon, raid, attack and disrupt the enemy's Ho Chi Minh Trail network in Laos and Cambodia.

Howard was magnificent. Take all John Wayne's films – throw in Clint Eastwood's, too -- and these fictions could not measure up to the real Bob Howard. Officially he was awarded eight Purple Hearts but he actually was wounded 14 times. Six of the wounds, he decided, weren't bad enough to be worthy of the award. Keep in mind that for each time he was wounded, there probably were ten times that he was nearly wounded and you get some idea of his combat service. He was right up there with America's greatest heroes – Davy Crockett, Audie Murphy, Alvin York – the inspiring example we other Green Berets tried to live up to. "What would Bob Howard do?" many of us asked

ourselves when surrounded and outnumbered, just a handful of men to fight off hordes of North Vietnamese.

To call him a legend is no exaggeration. Take the time he was in a chow line at an American base and a Vietnamese terrorist on a motorbike tossed a hand grenade at them. While others leaped for cover, Howard snatched an M-16 from a petrified security guard, dropped to one knee and expertly shot the driver, and then chased the passenger a half-mile and killed him, too.

One night his recon team laid beside an enemy highway in Laos as a convoy rolled past. Running alongside an enemy truck in pitch blackness, he spun an armed claymore mine over his head like a lasso, then threw it among enemy soldiers crammed in the back, detonated it, and ran away to fight another day.

Another time, he was riding a Huey with Larry White and Robert Clough into Laos, when their pilot unknowingly landed beside two heavily camouflaged enemy helicopters. Fire erupted instantly, riddling their Huey and hitting White three times, knocking him to the ground. Firing back, Howard and Clough jumped out, grabbed White and their Huey somehow limped back to South Vietnam.

“Just knowing Bob Howard was ready to come and get you meant a lot to us,” said recon team leader Lloyd O’Daniels. Consider the rescue of Joe Walker. His recon team and a SOG platoon had been overrun near a major Laotian highway and, seriously wounded, Walker was hiding with a Montagnard soldier, unable to move. Howard inserted a good distance away with a dozen men and, because there were so many enemy present, waited for darkness to sneak into the area. Howard felt among bodies for

heartbeats, and checked one figure's lanky legs, then felt for Joe's signature horn-rimmed glasses. "You sweet motherfucker," Walker whispered, and Howard took him to safety.

What's all the more remarkable is that not one of these incidents resulted in any award – Howard was just doing what had to be done, he thought.

Above and Beyond the Call of Duty

Unique in American military history, this Opelika, Alabama native was submitted for the Medal of Honor three times in 13 months for separate combat actions, witnessed by fellow Green Berets. The first came in November 1967. While a larger SOG element destroyed an enemy cache, Howard screened forward and confronted a large enemy force, killing four enemy soldiers, then he took out an NVA sniper. Then, "pinned down...with a blazing machine gun only six inches above his head," he shot and killed an entire NVA gun crew at point-blank range, and then destroyed another machine gun position with a grenade. He so demoralized the enemy force that they withdrew. This Medal of Honor recommendation was downgraded to a Silver Star.

The next incident came a year later. Again accompanying a larger SOG force, he performed magnificently, single-handedly knocking out a PT-76 tank, a day later wiping out an anti-aircraft gun crew, and afterward rescuing the crew of a downed Huey. Repeatedly wounded, he bled from his arms, legs, back and face, but he refused to be evacuated. Again submitted for the Medal of Honor, his recommendation was downgraded, this time to the Distinguished Service Cross.

Just six weeks later, Howard volunteered to accompany a platoon going into Laos in search of a missing recon man, Robert Scherdin. Ambushed by a large enemy force, Howard was badly wounded, his M-16 blown to bits – yet he crawled to the aid of a

wounded lieutenant, fought off NVA soldiers with a grenade, then a .45 pistol, and managed to drag the officer away. Burned and slashed by shrapnel, we thought we'd never see him again – but he went AWOL from the hospital and came back in pajamas to learn he'd been again submitted for the Medal of Honor. This time it went forward to Washington, with assurances that it would be approved.

Howard did not know the word, “hopeless.” Many years later he explained his mindset during the Medal of Honor operation: “I had one choice: to lay and wait, or keep fighting for my men. If I waited, I gambled that things would get better while I did nothing. If I kept fighting, no matter how painful, I could stack the odds that recovery for my men and a safe exodus was achievable.”

Although eventually sent home, he came back yet again, to spend with us the final months before his Medal of Honor ceremony. By then he had served more than 5 years in Vietnam. Why so much time in Vietnam? “I guess it's because I want to help in any way I can,” Howard explained. “I may as well be here where I can use my training; and besides, I have to do it – it's the way I feel about my job.”

Humility

The warrior ethic came naturally to Bob Howard. His father and four uncles had all been paratroopers in World War Two. Of them, two had died in combat, and the other three succumbed to wounds after the war. To support his mother and maternal grandparents, he and his sister picked cotton. He also learned old-fashioned Southern civility, removing his hat for any lady and answering, “Yes, ma'am.”

He also possessed a deep sense of honor and justice, and lived by his unspoken warrior's code, with the priorities mission, men, and his own interests coming last. He

absolutely fit the bill as a leader you'd follow through hell's gates – IF you could keep up with him. A hard-charging physical fitness advocate, he even had our Montagnard tribesmen running and doing calisthenics.

After draping the Medal of Honor around Howard's neck, President Nixon asked him what he wanted to do the rest of that memorable day – *lunch with the president, a tour of the White House, almost anything*. Howard asked simply to be taken to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier to share his thoughts with others who had gone before him. Tragically, the U.S. media, reflecting the anti-war sentiments of that period, said not one word about Howard or his valiant deeds, although by the time he received the Medal of Honor he was America's most highly decorated serviceman.

After the War

Despite the lack of recognition, Howard went on serving to the best of his ability. He was the training officer at the Army's Airborne School, then he was a company commander in the 2nd Ranger Battalion at Ft. Lewis, Washington. He continued to excel at everything he did, making Distinguished Honor Graduate in his Officer Advance Course class.

As the officer-in-charge of Special Forces training at Camp Mackall, near Ft. Bragg, N.C., and later, commanding the Mountain Ranger Training Camp at Daholenga, Georgia, he did his utmost to inspire young students. Howard's frame of reference was SOG -- hard combat, the toughest kind against terrible odds with impossible missions. He knew good men would die or fail in combat without martial skills, tactical knowledge and physical conditioning. He was famous for leading runs and long-distance rucksack marches – usually he outran entire classes of students, stronger than men half his age. A

whole generation of Army Special Forces and Rangers earned their qualifications under his shining example, with some graduates among the senior leaders of today's Special Forces and Ranger units.

His highest assignment was commander of Special Forces Detachment, Korea. He might have gone higher but he dared to publicly suggest that American POWs had been left in enemy hands, and was willing to testify to that before Congress in 1986. After he retired as a full colonel, he went through multiple surgeries to try to correct the many injuries he'd suffered over the years.

But he could not stop helping GIs. He spent another 20 years with the Department of Veterans Affairs, helping disabled vets. He had a reputation for rankling his superiors as an unapologetic advocate of veterans.

His spirit never waned. In 2004 I sat with Green Berets of the 1st Special Forces Group at Ft. Lewis, Wash., who laughed and cheered when he joked about still being tough enough to take on any two men in the audience – not one raised his hand. After retiring from the VA, Col. Howard often visited with American servicemen to speak about his combat experiences, making five trips to Iraq and Afghanistan. In the fall of 2009, he visited troops in Germany, Bosnia and Kosovo.

Despite increasing pain and sickness, on Veterans Day 2009 he kept his word to attend a memorial ceremony, but finally he had to seek help. He was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer and given a few weeks to live.

In those final days old Special Forces and Ranger friends slipped past "No Visitors" signs to see him. When SOG vets Ben Lyons and Martin Bennett and a civilian friend, Chuck Hendricks, visited him, Howard climbed from his bed to model the uniform jacket

he would be buried in, festooned with the Medal of Honor and rows upon rows of ribbons. A proud Master parachutist and military skydiver, he showed them the polished jump boots he'd been working on, and asked Bennett to touch up the spit shine. Though his feet might not be visible in his coffin, he wanted that shine just right.

As they left, Col. Howard thanked Bennett, and then saluted him and held his hand crisply to his eyebrow until Bennett returned it. Bob Howard passed away two days before Christmas.

This great hero, a humble knight that was a paragon for all, belongs to history now. He is survived by his daughters Denicia, Melissa and Rosslyn; an Airborne-Ranger son, Robert Jr., and four grandchildren.

The End

FOLLOWING ARE RESIZED PHOTOS WITH CUTLINES
(Photos on Disk are full-size)



At a ceremony in the Oval Office, Capt. Robert Howard receives the Medal of Honor from President Richard M. Nixon.



SOG recon men (L-R) SSG Charles Erickson, Bob Howard, SSG Walter Horion, SSG Ron Gravett, SGT Dan Lindblom.



Howard stands beside the badly shot-up Huey aboard which his team narrowly escaped from Laos, 1968.



Sgt. 1 C. Howard with SPC 4 George W. Bacon III, a Special Forces medic and SOG recon man. Bacon later served with the CIA in Laos, and was killed by Cuban soldiers in Angola in 1976.



As compassionate as he was combative, Howard carries a wounded NVA prisoner to the CCC dispensary, 1969.



Soon after receiving the Medal of Honor, Howard (standing, second from left) was an operations officer at the Army's Airborne School at Ft. Benning, Ga. He went on to instruct for Special Forces and the Army Ranger School.



Maj. Bob Howard bows his head during the dedication of the Vietnam Wall, 1982.



After retirement, Col. Howard made five trips to Iraq and Afghanistan to boost morale for the young soldiers and marines he admired and supported. With him is SSG Robert Harris, 5th Special Forces Group.



Along with fellow Medal of Honor recipient Gary Littrell, Howard pens a message on a 2,000-lb. bomb, about to be delivered in Iraq by a USAF bomber.



In 2009, Col. Howard and other Medal of Honor recipients accompany President Barak Obama to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Less than a year later, Howard will be laid to rest only a few hundred yards away at Arlington Cemetery.