

PROLOGUE



THIS STORY BEGINS in a U.S. government-issued body bag.

The date was May 2, 1968; the location, Loc Ninh Special Forces camp near the Cambodian border in South Vietnam. Inside the zippered tomb lay a stocky, five-foot-six-inch-tall U.S. Army Green Beret staff sergeant named Roy Benavidez. Earlier that day he had jumped from a hovering helicopter, then had run through enemy lines to reach what remained of an American-led twelve-man Special Forces team surrounded by hundreds of North Vietnamese Army soldiers.

A few strides into his heroic dash, a bullet passed through his leg and knocked him off his feet. Determined to reach his comrades, he rose and continued his sprint, zigzagging through enemy fire for almost seventy-five yards before he went down again, this time from the explosion of a near-miss rocket-propelled grenade. Ignoring both the bullet and his shrapnel wounds, he crawled the remaining few yards into the beleaguered team's perimeter, took control, provided medical aid, and

positioned the remaining men to fight back the endless waves of attacking NVA while he called in dangerously close air support.

For the next several hours, Benavidez saved the lives of at least eight men during fierce, at times hand-to-hand combat before allowing himself to be the last man pulled into a helicopter that had finally made it to the ground amidst the relentless onslaught. There he collapsed motionless, atop a pile of wounded and dying men. His body—a torn-up canvas of bullet holes, shrapnel wounds, bayonet lacerations, punctures, burns, and bruises—painted a bloody portrait of his valor that day.

FOR NEARLY a decade his story, and the story of the May 2 battle, remained untold. That was until Fred Barbee, a newspaper publisher from Benavidez's hometown of El Campo, Texas, got wind of it and ran a cover story in the *El Campo Leader-News* on February 22, 1978. The intent of his article was twofold: to honor Benavidez by recounting his heroics and to berate the Senior Army Decorations Board for its staunch refusal to bestow upon Benavidez what Barbee believed was a long-overdue and unfairly denied Congressional Medal of Honor.

Barbee wanted to know what the holdup was. His tireless research elicited few answers from the Decorations Board, whose anonymous members, he quickly learned, answered to no one—not congressional representatives, not colonels (two of whom had lobbied for Sergeant Benavidez), and certainly not a small-town newspaper publisher.

But Barbee wouldn't let it go. He was perplexed when the board cited "no new evidence" as its most recent reason for denying the medal, when in fact there was plenty of new evidence. Topping the list was an updated statement written by Benavidez's commanding officer, citing previously unknown facts that corroborated the sergeant's legendary actions. There was also testimony from the helicopter pilots and aircrews who witnessed the battle from the air or listened in on the radio

as events transpired. According to the board, although these accounts were compelling, there was no eye-witness testimony from anybody *on the ground*. This criterion seemed impossible to meet; almost nobody on the ground May 2 had survived either that day or the war. The few who had were off the grid, having either become expatriates or burned their uniforms and melted into an American populace that more often than not had shamed them for their service in Vietnam.

“What, then, happened on that awful day . . . in the Republic of Vietnam?” Barbee questioned in his article. “Or, perhaps this particular action on May 2, 1968, actually took place outside the boundaries of Vietnam, perhaps in an area where U.S. forces were not supposed to be, perhaps that is the reason for the continuing runaround. . . .”

THE ASSOCIATED Press picked up Barbee’s article, and it circulated into some of the American news sections of international papers. By July of 1980, it had traveled halfway around the world to the South Pacific, finding its way into the hands of a retired Green Beret and Vietnam veteran who was living in Fiji with his wife and two young children.

Brian O’Connor immediately recognized the date in the article, May 2, 1968; the hours-long battle was his worst, most horrific memory from what was known as “the secret war.” He remembered being under a pile of bodies on a helicopter, slippery with blood and suffocating. Now, as he read the story, O’Connor was appalled to learn that Benavidez had never received the Medal of Honor. He knew he would have to revisit and recount his memory of the battle—in detail. He owed it to the man who had, against all odds, saved his life.

Determined to set the record straight, O’Connor dated a sheet of paper July 24, 1980, and addressed it to the Army Decorations Board:

“This statement,” O’Connor wrote, “on the events that happened on 2 May 1968 is given as evidence to assist the decision made on awarding

the Congressional Medal of Honor to Master Sergeant Roy Benavidez. Because of the classified nature of the mission, some important details will be left out which should not in any way affect the outcome of the award.”

Page after page, the darkness flowed from his pen as O'Connor relived the nightmarish day. From the insertion of his twelve-man team deep behind enemy lines to the desperate hours when they were surrounded and vastly outnumbered by what many estimated was a battalion or more of well-armed North Vietnamese Army soldiers. He pieced together the torn and sometimes blurry snapshots from his memory, recounting the deaths of his teammates one by one, as well as the several helicopter rescue attempts beaten back by a determined enemy that was on the verge of overrunning their position:

The interpreter, who now had his arm hanging on to the shoulder by a hunk of muscle and skin, tugged at me to say the ATL [assistant team leader] wanted me. Firing and rolling on my side, I saw the ATL on his emergency radio and I nodded my head and the ATL hollered to me “ammo—ammo—grenades.” Stripping the two dead CIDG [Civilian Irregular Defense Group, the South Vietnamese Special Forces] of their ammo and grenades, I moved a meter or two, where I threw the clips and grenades to a CIDG, who in turn threw them to the ATL. During the minute or two of calm, the interpreter and I patched our wounds, injected morphine syrettes, tied off his arm with a tourniquet, and ran an IV of serum of albumin in my arm for blood loss . . . while the one remaining CIDG observed for enemy movement. I looked over to the ATL, and they were doing about the same thing. . . . We had another few seconds of silence and the ATL shouted, “they’re coming in.” I figured a final assault to overrun us and we prepared for the

worst. . . . I caught a burst of auto fire in the abdomen and the radio was shot out. I was put out of commission and just laid behind [a] body firing at the NVA in the open field until the ammo ran out. . . .

I was ready to die.