

Vietnam vet finally gets award for valor

by Spc. Bill Putam

WASHINGTON (Army News Service, April 25, 2003) -- A veteran's trip to the Pentagon to receive the nation's second-highest award for valor brought back memories from a battle that happened in Vietnam 36 years ago.

Retired Lt. Col. Albert "Clark" Welch received the Distinguished Service Cross from LTG John Le Moyne, the Army's deputy chief of staff G-1 (Personnel) April 25 in the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes.

"This is not about me, this is about the men who fought with me. This is about those of us in the profession of arms," Welch said about being awarded the medal.

Welch's wife, Lacey, and two sons attended the ceremony.

Welch arrived in Vietnam in 1967 and was assigned to the 1st Inf Div's 2nd Bn, 28th Inf Reg. A few months after arriving, he was in command of the battalion's Co D. While in command of that company, 1,400 Viet Cong soldiers ambushed his battalion at Ong Thanh Oct. 17.

Three battalions of Viet Cong soldiers opened fire on his and one other company.

Snipers in 100-foot-tall trees and enemy troops in bunkers and brush with grenade launchers and machine guns began the attack following their commander's signal of clicking sticks together three times.

Interviewed after the attack, PVT Faustin Sena said, "He screamed at me to get the radio. It was 40 yards away so I slithered over there like a lizard. I couldn't see a damn thing. The sound was deafening. I couldn't hear my own gun firing, but I could hear Welch, screaming above the noise, putting his men in positions, calling in orders. First he was here, then he was there. He was everywhere, making sure we held our ground, that we didn't panic."

During the attack, automatic fire took Welch's bicep off his left arm. The muscle fell on the ground in front of him. He was shot in the chest while dragging two wounded men to safety. Another bullet hit his right leg and machine gun fire hit his left arm so hard that it knocked him to the ground.

Most of the men in Welch's company and Alpha Company whom they were following died that day.

The enemy left the scene thinking that all of the American soldiers were killed. Later a platoon sergeant from within the battalion was sent to re-establish contact with the unit.

He found Welch and another soldier against a tree surrounded by 60 dead enemy soldiers.

Why it took so long to award the medal is a testament to who Clark is, said retired BG Jack Shelton. Welch and Shelton served together in the 2nd of the 28th Infantry until shortly before the battle when Shelton became the division's assistant operations officer.

“He was the best we had in the battalion,” Shelton said of Welch. “But the Army sort of lost Welch after the battle.”

When Welch arrived in Vietnam, he was originally assigned to the 5th Special Forces Group. But he was diverted to the 2nd of the 28th Inf to replace a platoon leader that died. His records probably ended up at the Special Forces and not at the battalion, Shelton said.

With the battalion commander and the command elements of the battalion’s Co A killed in the opening stages of the battle, Welch was left to organize the battalion’s defense, said Shelton.

After Welch recuperated from his numerous wounds, he wrote awards for everyone else in the company—including a posthumous Medal of Honor citation for the fire support officer, 2LT Harold “Pinkie” Durham.

But he couldn’t write anything for himself and there weren’t many witnesses to attest for Welch’s actions that day, Shelton said. Out of 140 men in the company before the battle, 60 died and the rest were wounded, he added.

The only witness at first was 1SG Clarence Barrows, the company’s first sergeant, Shelton said.

At least four witnesses need to testify for a Medal of Honor and eventually three more were found, Shelton said. With the four witnesses, Shelton put Welch in for the Medal of Honor. That award was downgraded to a DSC, but another review for a Medal of Honor is pending, Shelton said.

“The things he did are worthy of a Medal of Honor,” Shelton added.

Welch’s other decorations for valor include three Silver Stars and five Bronze Stars.

(Editor’s note: LTC Stan Heath, G1 public affairs officer, contributed to this article.)