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Rockwall resident gets long-overdue Bronze Star

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The first blast knocked him off his cot and out of his slumber. Slipping into his pants and boots, he rushed toward the machine gun as enemy rounds shook and tore the compound.



MIKE STONE/Special Contributor

More than 38 years after a superior recommended him for the medal, Jim Greenwalt received the Bronze Star for helping fend off a Viet Cong surprise attack in South Vietnam.

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A comrade, slight of build, struggled with the tripod-mounted weapon, shooting wildly into the deep night sky. So he took over, attacking the trigger with both thumbs, as his sidekick fed belted cartridges into the .50-caliber killer and spotted targets.

"I fired at muzzle flashes, sounds, any movement," said Jim Greenwalt, recalling the violence that repelled a Viet Cong attack on an outpost in South Vietnam.

More than 38 years and an apparent paperwork snafu later, the Rockwall resident and former Army sergeant is receiving an official bravo from his country for that outburst of bravery.

As the fighting continues in Iraq and Afghanistan, his contribution on Jan. 30, 1970 — to America's longest, widely criticized war — will be remembered today at a ceremony at Fort Hood in central Texas.

The U.S. Army awarded more than 170,000 Bronze Stars for bravery during the Vietnam War and another 550,000 for meritorious service, including one to Mr. Greenwalt, a 63-year-old economic development specialist for the city of Dallas.

His latest recognition, while far from unique, is still a family treasure — and a surprise of sorts. Mr. Greenwalt learned five years ago that a commanding officer had recommended the award after the fighting.

"I never expected to get anything for this," he said last week in the relative peace of his city hall office, drifting back to that unusually humid morning inside a mud-walled fort near waterways, rice fields and a clutch of homes called Rach Ban.

"I never thought about it being anything extraordinary or special."

Sgt. Greenwalt spent most of his 12 months in South Vietnam with Army Mobile Advisory Team IV-74, training militias in tactics and weaponry, helping farmers and fisherman defend their homes in the country's remote southern reaches.

And there he was with two teammates — a commanding first lieutenant and a drunk medic — and about 40 local fighters when the attack on their triangular, partially moated outpost erupted about 2 a.m.

"If he had not done what he did, we would probably have all died," said Gary Findlay, the team commander, recalling the assault that killed (to his and Mr. Greenwalt's best guess) 10 of their trainees, untold numbers of the enemy and silenced the outpost's other automatic weapons, two M60 machine guns.

As his medal certificate puts it: "Sergeant Greenwalt, with complete disregard for his own personal safety, repeatedly exposed himself to intense enemy small arms and accurate indirect weapons fire while manning the ... 50 caliber machine gun."

Mr. Findlay, now chief executive of Missouri's state employee retirement system, said he submitted paperwork for Sgt. Greenwalt's medal after the attack.

He was surprised to learn in 2003 that the award had never been received.

Mr. Greenwalt, trying to connect with war buddies, had tracked him down with a phone call.

"I casually mentioned, 'I assume you got the Bronze Star I put you in for,'" Mr. Findlay said. "He said, 'Nope.'"

The two, with the help of U.S. Rep. Ralph Hall of Rockwall, reapplied for the medal.

An Army official wanted a second witness to corroborate their written accounts. But such was not possible, they said, because the only other team member was inebriated and incapacitated during the attack.

Mr. Findlay, who received the Army Commendation Medal for his fighting at Rach Ban, pressed for the award, as did a former senior Army adviser in Vietnam, who wrote that he had seen and endorsed the earlier recommendation.

So on Aug. 20, Mr. Greenwalt proudly received the medal, 42 years after enlisting in his hometown Chattanooga, Tenn., to avoid the draft.

"I was excited when I saw it. To be honored by my country for doing my job is just great," he said last week, tearing up a bit.

Those eyes would likely flow as well at the Fort Hood ceremony, he said, partly for two friends, among the more than 58,000 American troops who died in Vietnam before the war's humbling end in 1975.

Sgt. Greenwalt emerged from almost four years in the Army without a wound, but knows he and the other survivors at Rach Ban were fortunate to be alive, in one respect lived on borrowed time.

A Navy crew delivered the three Army advisers to the outpost four days before U.S. planes would bomb the Ho Chi Minh Trail in retaliation for increased Viet Cong raids in the South.

"I didn't like the looks of the place," said Mr. Findlay, who got the crew commander to loan them the gun and ammunition that Sgt. Greenwalt would employ with hand-numbing effectiveness only hours later.

Mobile teams normally didn't carry such firepower, he said, and the intelligence-rich Viet Cong wouldn't have expected it.

So one surprise greeted another.

In time the commander reclaimed his gun.

"I had to give it back," Mr. Findlay said. "I thanked him profusely."