

'The Rock' Provides Foundation For Medal of Honor Performance



Soldiers from 2nd Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, during a live-fire exercise in Slovenia. Above: The Medal of Honor.



U.S. Army/Staff Sgt. Pablo N. Piedra

By Capt. Tom Latham

Spc. Salvatore A. Giunta's Medal of Honor citation reads, "Specialist Giunta then advanced forward on his own initiative. As he crested the top of a hill, he observed two insurgents carrying away an American soldier. He immediately engaged the enemy, killing one and wounding the other. Upon reaching the wounded soldier, he began to provide medical aid, as his squad caught up and provided security. Specialist Giunta's unwavering courage, selflessness and decisive leadership while under extreme enemy fire were integral to his platoon's ability to defeat an enemy ambush and recover a fellow American soldier from the enemy."

This could have been an isolated incident, a soldier thrust into unusual circumstances who performed superbly well, if it weren't for what happened a month later, on Nov. 9, 2007.

While serving as a radio operator, Spc. Kyle J. White and his platoon came under intense enemy fire. He treated the wounded, cared for the dying, organized the survivors to secure the perimeter, and called in U.S. gunships and artillery to quell the enemy. For his actions, White received the Medal of Honor, becoming the second Medal of Honor recipient from the same battalion as Giunta—2nd Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry Regiment (2/503), 173rd Airborne Brigade.

More remarkable yet is what happened on July 13, 2008. Serving as a forward observer, a wounded Sgt. Ryan M. Pitts defended his outpost with hand grenades and used a radio to call for fire. Pitts' determination to not give up and to fight on in spite of his wounds allowed him to repel a force of over 200



U.S. Army/Leroy Council



U.S. Army/Staff Sgt. Laura Buchra



U.S. Army/Sgt. Laura Buchra

Three living recipients of the Medal of Honor are from the same battalion. Clockwise from above: Staff Sgt. Salvatore A. Giunta; Staff Sgt. Ryan M. Pitts; and Sgt. Kyle J. White.

enemy fighters. He refused to give them that key piece of terrain. Pitts became the third living recipient of the Medal of Honor from the same battalion. Two of these men were from the same company.

That our nation's highest honor was given to three soldiers from the same organization not only reflects the intensity of combat they faced, but also speaks to the leadership training and spirit of excellence and brotherhood that formed these young men for battle.

To put this in another context, it would be the equivalent of one U.S. college athletic department being responsible for a quarter of the U.S. gold medal count at a particular Olympics.

The city of Vicenza, Italy, is home to the 2/503. The unit adopted its nickname, The Rock, from the island of Corregidor in the Philippines, onto which it made a combat jump during World War II.

I was privileged to serve as the chaplain for 2/503 from 2011 to 2014. During that time, I observed five leadership factors I believe helped create a leadership pipeline that so far has formed a championship team unequalled and unrivaled

Capt. Tom Latham is a chaplain with U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command. Previously, he served as chaplain in Iraq during Operation New Dawn as well as for the 82nd Airborne Division.

is a chaplain with 53rd Satellite Control. Previously, he served as chaplain in 82nd Airborne Division, XVIII Airborne Corp, and 173rd Airborne Brigade with deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.

among conventional forces. This culture of excellence has propelled the unit into the nation's consciousness.

A Higher Standard

The Army has standards that every soldier must meet, but airborne requires scores that are considerably higher than normal for both the Army Physical Fitness Test and weapons qualification. The 2/503 combined the standards of airborne, the 173rd Airborne Brigade and The Rock. We all had a copy of them on our "How We Fight" card, and it was laminated, folded and carried in our pocket. That is just one example of how our leaders cultivated a culture of higher standards.

The Brand

The public affairs officer for the 173rd spends time thinking about how to increase the brand recognition of the brigade. This is done through hosting a "Bayonet Week," celebrated recently with sports competitions, ceremonies and a ball. The 173rd Airborne Brigade Association is very active, and at the National Infantry Museum and Soldier Center, there is a memorial dedicated to the brigade honoring its fallen and celebrating its history. The 2/503 also takes time to build its brand through a battalion store, the wearing of the battalion T-shirt during all physical fitness training events and the sale of other interesting items.

How do you know when you have achieved brand status? In the clothing industry, it's when people start buying your T-shirts, jeans, polo shirts and accessories. In the military, it's when you get a tattoo. Thousands of 173rd soldiers today carry the marks of their organization, the names of the fallen and the badges they honor. Their wings, their patches, their combat awards, all in permanent ink proudly displayed—that is the brand.

Tough, Realistic Training

Much of the 173rd's training is conducted in Germany at Grafenwoehr and Hohenfels Training areas. This requires a 10-hour, one-way bus ride for the units that are south of the Alps. That forces the unit to plan for months ahead to make every training dollar and minute count. The amount of time spent training prior to a deployment almost equals the amount of time deployed.

We chaplains also did a lot of training in a multiple-site environment where the delivery of religious support would re-

quire battlefield circulation (when a leader circulates personally among troops). It would mean that the chaplain would have to divide his time between the headquarters and a ring route checking in with subordinate companies. These activities were rehearsed and simulated during our mission readiness training.

Part of the training included combat drills as the units trained on a glide path from fire team to squad to platoon to company to battalion and brigade-level exercises. Some of the skills trained on were dead gunner drills, applying a tourniquet, entering and clearing a room, cordon and search, support by fire, call for fire, and collecting biometrics at checkpoints. The men rehearsed these drills until they could perform them flawlessly in the day, at night, with blanks and then with live ammunition.

Brotherhood

Some would call this esprit de corps, but in The Rock it was much more than bravado and a cult of unit history. This sense of brotherhood is magnified within the 173rd even more so than other airborne infantry units in part because of the common experience of living overseas. Italy is great, but it is not America, and members of the unit are forced to rely on each other more, being far from their family support systems. Isolated by language and culture, the brotherhood increases as unit members serve each other and look after each other's personal needs. The shared experiences of previous combat deployments add to this brotherhood. The cultivation of brand and the territorial, competitive nature of battalion versus battalion and company versus company increase this as well.

Shared hardships through training rotations and deployments place individual warriors in a family system that even in its most dysfunctional state cannot be broken, infiltrated or diminished. The harder the experience, the harsher the circumstances endured, greater still is the measure of brotherhood forged.

This was evident when we arrived back from deployment in 2013. Giunta greeted us in civilian clothes as we got off the plane. He wanted to be there. He had no other agenda than to welcome his brothers home despite the fact that he lived in Colorado and had left military service.

Uber-professionals

I spent three years at Fort Bragg, N.C.—what some call the center of the universe—before moving to Vicenza and my assignment to The Rock. I was in the 82nd Airborne Division and the XVIII Airborne Corps. These are unquestionably some of our nation's most professional military organizations, but within the ranks of The Rock, I found an un-

paralleled number of what I would call uber-professionals.

The NCO corps is known as the backbone of the Army. NCOs carry out the day-to-day operations and training. They are the continuity of a unit, typically staying longer in positions of leadership than the officers. This means that it is the NCO to whom a new soldier looks for example, training, accountability and encouragement.

The Rock took this a step further by drawing uber-professionals to its ranks, and I say drawing because men want to serve here: They volunteer, they extend their enlistments, they re-enlist and they extend their overseas tours to stay in the battalion. They draw to their ranks a core cadre of professionals from the most elite academic organizations within the Army training system. In The Rock you will find drill instructors, airborne instructors known as Black Hats, Jumpmaster instructors, Pathfinder instructors, Old Guard veterans trained in Army ceremonies, and the highest level of conventional NCO Ranger instructors.

Imagine showing up to your unit to find your squad leader or platoon sergeant is your old drill sergeant, your Airborne School instructor or, for some brand-new lieutenants, their Ranger instructor. The high degree of professionalism that these practitioners of Army training are able to bring to the organization propels it beyond common levels of accepted performance to constantly higher and higher degrees of perfectionism. Of the five factors mentioned, this is the one that I most attribute to The Rock's, and consequently the 173rd's, success in combat.

These five factors of higher standards, brand, training, brotherhood and uber-professionals are what contributed to The Rock becoming a leadership factory. ★

(Insert before last paragraph.

King Saul saw the need for these kind of men and actively recruited them. 1 Kings 14:52 says, "The Israelites fought constantly with the Philistines throughout Saul's lifetime. So whenever Saul observed a young man who was brave and strong, he drafted him into his army."

(Insert at end of article) This article represents the author's opinion and does not represent the Army or the 173rd nor the three MOH recipients mentioned.



Staff Sgt. Miles Perez and Sgt. Jefferey Shaw of the 2/503 sight enemy movement in Afghanistan.

U.S. Army/Staff Sgt. Tyffani L. Davis