‘Duty, Honor, Country’ was the only way for Rocky Versace

In the MI Soldier Heritage Learning Center at the US Army Intelligence Center of Excellence there stands a small glass display case with a replica of the Medal of Honor and the story of one captain who earned it. Hundreds of Soldiers, civilian employees, visitors, and family members pass by that case every month. How many stop to read the words behind the medal? How many realize what Capt. “Rocky” Versace stood for and why he was so honored? The display case will soon be gone, due to a renovation of the foyer of Alvarado Hall. It is imperative that we remember this amazing officer and Soldier who was such an inspiration to his men and who made the ultimate sacrifice for his country.

Humbert Rocque “Rocky” Versace was a 1959 graduate of West Point, commissioned a second lieutenant in Armor. He completed Ranger School and Airborne School before going to Korea to serve with the 1st Cavalry Division as a medium tank platoon leader. Upon promotion to First Lieutenant, he served again as a tank platoon leader for the 3rd Infantry (Old Guard), at Fort Meyer, Virginia.

While not an “intelligence officer,” Versace was serving in an intelligence position in 1962. During the first four months of that year he had attended the Military Assistance Institute in Arlington, VA; the Intelligence Course at Fort Holabird, Maryland; and the Vietnamese language course at the Presidio of Monterey, California. In May, he was assigned as an Intelligence Advisor in III Corps, in the Long Kanh province of Vietnam. In November, he moved over to work as Assistant G-2 Advisor, Staff Advisory Branch, 5th Infantry Division, located in Bien Hoa, where he completed his one-year tour. First Lt. Versace extended his tour in May 1963 for an additional six months. He pinned on Captain’s bars and was moved to Advisory Team 70 as the Intelligence Advisor to Civil Defense and Self Defense Forces operating in the Mekong Delta Region of South Vietnam.
On October 29, 1963, CPT Versace met with another American Advisor, 1LT Nick Rowe, operating out of Special Forces Camp A-23, to exchange intelligence reports on enemy activity in the area. The two advisors, along with an American medic, SFC Daniel Pitzer, accompanied a Civilian Irregular Defense Group, or CIDG, made up of 129 Cambodian and South Vietnamese Soldiers on a combat patrol in Au Xuyen province. They were ambushed by a unit of approximately 1,000 seasoned guerrilla fighters. The patrol put up a fierce fight for about three hours, calling for aid and receiving none, using up nearly all of their ammunition. The three Americans provided cover fire, allowing some of the CIDG to escape, but were wounded and taken prisoner by the Viet Cong. CPT Versace’s wounds were the most serious. He had bullet wounds in his leg and knee, and flesh wounds in his back from mortar fragments.

Stripped of their weapons, the prisoners were marched barefoot to a jungle prison camp. Upon arrival Captain Versace assumed command as senior prisoner, representing his fellow Americans. He was immediately labeled a troublemaker by his captors for insisting that they honor the Geneva Convention’s protections for captured prisoners of war. The Viet Cong did not acknowledge any protections guaranteed to prisoners as required by the Geneva Convention, and considered the three Americans to be “war criminals.”

Because of his aggressive attitude, the guards separated Versace from Rowe and Pitzer, putting him in a bamboo isolation cage six feet long, two feet wide, and three feet high. According to Rowe and Pitzer, “He was kept in irons, flat on his back, it was dark and hot [from thatch on the roof and outside bamboo walls], and they only let him out to use that latrine and to eat. What they were trying to do was to break him. They even offered better food and they would let him out if he would cooperate, but he would not.” Instead, he used his trips to the latrine to leave messages for Rowe and Pitzer and sang songs of encouragement to them whenever they were within earshot. Using his Vietnamese and French language skills, he regularly protested the guards’ treatment of the prisoners, to no avail.

Within three weeks of his capture, Versace made the first of four escape attempts, despite his severe injuries. When he was discovered, crawling on his hands and knees through dense swamp and jungle, he was returned to leg irons, refused medical treatment, put on a starvation diet, and subjected to physical abuse. The Viet Cong forced the American POWs to attend a political “re-education” school, in which intense political indoctrination was repeated over and over. 1LT Rowe later described how it took two guards to force CPT Versace to attend, quoting him as saying, ‘you can make me come to this class, but I am an officer in the United States Army. You can make me listen, you can force me to sit here, but I don’t believe a word of what you are saying.’ The guards classified him as “uncooperative.”

According to SFC Pitzer, “Rocky walked his own path. All of us did but for that guy, duty, honor, country was a way of life. He was the finest example of an officer I have known. To him it was a matter of liberty or death, the Big Four [name, rank, service number, and date of birth] and nothing more. There was no other way for him. Once, Rocky told our captors that as long as he was true to God and true to himself, what was waiting for him after this life was far better than anything that could happen now. So he told them that they might as well kill him then and there if the price of his life was getting more from him than name, rank, and serial number”. Pitzer also
noted that “The VC realized Rocky was a captain, Nick [Rowe] a lieutenant, and I a sergeant, so they singled him out as ranking man. Rocky stood toe to toe with them. He told them to go to hell in Vietnamese, French, and English. He got a lot of pressure and torture, but he held his path. As a West Point grad, it was duty, honor, country. There was no other way……..I know that he valued that one moment of honor more than he would have a lifetime of compromises.”

Captain Versace was a prisoner of the Viet Cong until 26 September 1965, when he was executed by his captors because of his tenacious resistance and rigid adherence to the Code of Conduct. The last any of his fellow prisoners heard from him, Rocky Versace was signing “God Bless America” at the top of his lungs from his isolation box. His body lies in an unmarked grave somewhere in Vietnam. He was awarded a posthumous Purple Heart on 2 July 1966 and a posthumous Silver Star on 19 May 1971, but his nomination for the Medal of Honor was lost or misfiled. US Army Special Operations Command resubmitted the Medal of Honor nomination and Captain Versace was awarded the Medal of Honor on July 8, 2002 by President George Bush. Captain Versace was inducted into the MI Hall of Fame in 2003, a true hero.

This article was written in 2014 by Ruth Quinn, for the “This Week in MI History” series of the USAICOE Command History Office. It was originally published in the Fort Huachuca Scout.

For further reading:

1. Humbert Roque Versace MI Hall of Fame File, USAICOE Command Historian
3. Medal of Honor nomination