

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

Remarks on Presenting the Medal of Honor to Command Sergeant Major Bennie G. Adkins and Posthumously to Specialist 4 Donald P. Sloat
September 15, 2014

Please be seated. Good afternoon, and welcome to the White House. More than four decades ago, in early 1970, an American squad in Vietnam set out on patrol. They marched down a trail, past a rice paddy. Shots rang out and splintered the bamboo above their heads. The lead soldier tripped a wire: a booby trap. A grenade rolled toward the feet of a 20-year-old machine gunner. The pin was pulled, and that grenade would explode at any moment.

A few years earlier, on the other side of the country, deep in the jungle, a small group of Americans were crouched on top of a small hill. And it was dark, and they were exhausted; the enemy had been pursuing them for days. And now they were surrounded, and the enemy was closing in on all sides.

Two discrete moments, but today we honor two American soldiers for gallantry above and beyond the call of duty at each of those moments: Specialist Donald Sloat, who stood above that grenade, and Command Sergeant Major Bennie Adkins, who fought through a ferocious battle and found himself on that jungle hill.

Nearly half a century after their acts of valor, a grateful nation bestows upon these men the highest military decoration, the Medal of Honor.

Now, normally, this medal must be awarded within a few years of the action. But sometimes, even the most extraordinary stories can get lost in the fog of war or the passage of time. Yet when new evidence comes to light, certain actions can be reconsidered for this honor, and it is entirely right and proper that we have done so. And that is why we are here today.

So before I go any further, I want to thank everyone present here today whose research and testimonies and persistence over so many years finally resulted in these two men deserving the recognition they so richly deserve. I especially want to welcome members of the Medal of Honor Society, as well as two American families whose love and pride has never wavered.

Don Sloat grew up in the heart of Oklahoma in a town called Coweta. And he grew big, to over 6'4". He loved football and played for a year at a junior college. And then, he decided to join the Army. But when he went to enlist, he didn't pass his physical because of high blood pressure. So he tried again and again and again. In all, he took the physical maybe seven times until he passed, because Don Sloat was determined to serve his country.

In Vietnam, Don became known as one of the most liked and reliable guys in his company. Twice in his first months, his patrol was ambushed; both times, Don responded with punishing fire from his machine gun, leaving himself completely vulnerable to the enemy. And both times, he was recognized for his bravery. Or as Don put it in a letter home, "I guess they think [that] I'm really gung-ho or something." [*Laughter*]

And then one morning, Don and his squad set out on patrol, past that rice paddy, down that trail, when those shots rang out. When the lead soldier's foot tripped that wire and set off the booby trap, the grenade rolled right to Don's feet. And at that moment, he could have run. At that moment, he could have ducked for cover. But Don did something truly extraordinary. He reached down, and he picked that grenade up. And he turned to throw it, but there were

Americans in front of him and behind him, inside the kill zone. So Don held on to that grenade, and he pulled it close to his body. And he bent over it. And then, as one of the men said, "all of a sudden there was a boom."

The blast threw the lead soldier up against a boulder. Men were riddled with shrapnel. Four were medevaced out, but everyone else survived. Don had absorbed the brunt of the explosion with his body. He saved the lives of those next to him. And today, we're joined by two men who were with him on that patrol: Sergeant William Hacker and Specialist Michael Mulheim.

For decades, Don's family only knew that he was killed in action. They'd heard that he had stepped on a landmine. All those years, this Gold Star family honored the memory of their son and brother, whose name is etched forever on that granite wall not far from here. Late in her life, Don's mother, Evelyn, finally learned the full story of her son's sacrifice. And she made it her mission to have Don's actions properly recognized.

Now, sadly, nearly 3 years ago, Evelyn passed away. But she always believed—she knew—that this day would come. She even bought a special dress to wear to this ceremony. We are honored that Don—and his mom—are represented here today by Don's brother and sisters and their families. On behalf of this American family, I'd ask Don's brother, Dr. Bill Sloat, to come forward for the reading of the citation and accept the gratitude of our Nation.

[At this point, Lt. Cmdr. Jillian C. Malzone, USCG, Coast Guard Aide to the President, read the citation. The President then presented the medal, assisted by Lt. Col. Michael P. Wagner, USA, Army Aide to the President.]

At this point, I'd like to ask Bennie Adkins to come join me on stage.

Now, let me just say, the first thing you need to know is, when Bennie and I met in the Oval Office, he asked if he could sign back up. *[Laughter]* His lovely wife was not amused. *[Laughter]*

Most days, you can find Bennie at home down in Opelika, Alabama, tending his garden or his pontoon boat out on the lake. He's been married to Mary for 58 years. He's a proud father of five, grandfather of six; at 80, still going strong. A couple years ago, he came here to the White House with his fellow veterans for a breakfast we had on Veterans Day. He tells folk he was the only person he knows who has spilled his dessert in the White House. *[Laughter]* And I just have to correct you, that makes two of us. *[Laughter]* I've messed up my tie. I've messed up my pants. *[Laughter]*

But in the spring of 1966, Bennie was just 32 years old, on his second tour in Vietnam. He and his fellow Green Berets were at an isolated camp along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. A huge North Vietnamese force attacked, bombarding Bennie and his comrades with mortars and white phosphorus. At a time, it was nearly impossible to move without being wounded or killed. But Bennie ran into enemy fire again and again: to retrieve supplies and ammo; to carry the wounded to safety; to man the mortar pit, holding off wave after wave of enemy assaults. Three times, explosions blasted him out of that mortar pit, and three times, he returned.

I have to be honest, in a battle and daring escape that lasted 4 days, Bennie performed so many acts of bravery, we actually don't have time to talk about all of them. Let me just mention three.

On the first day, Bennie was helping load a wounded American onto a helicopter. A Vietnamese soldier jumped onto the helo trying to escape the battle and aimed his weapon

directly at the wounded soldier, ready to shoot. Bennie stepped in, shielded his comrade, placing himself directly in the line of fire, helping to save his wounded comrade.

At another point in the battle, Bennie and a few other soldiers were trapped in the mortar pit, covered in shrapnel and smoking debris. Their only exit was blocked by enemy machine gun fire. So Bennie thought fast. He dug a hole out of the pit and snuck out the other side. As another American escaped through that hole, he was shot in the leg. An enemy soldier charged him, hoping to capture a live POW, and Bennie fired, taking out that enemy and pulling his fellow American to safety.

By the third day of battle, Bennie and a few others had managed to escape into the jungle. He had cuts and wounds all over his body, but he refused to be evacuated. When a rescue helicopter arrived, Bennie insisted that others go instead. And so on the third night, Bennie, wounded and bleeding, found himself with his men up on that jungle hill, exhausted and surrounded, with the enemy closing in. And after all they had been through, as if it weren't enough, there was something more—you can't make this up—there in the jungle, they heard the growls of a tiger. *[Laughter]*

It turns out that tiger might have been the best thing that happened to Bennie in those—during those days because, he says, "the North Vietnamese were more scared of that tiger than they were of us." *[Laughter]* So the enemy fled. Bennie and his squad made their escape. And they were rescued, finally, the next morning.

In Bennie's life, we see the enduring service of our men and women in uniform. He went on to serve a third tour in Vietnam, a total of more than two decades in uniform. After he retired, he earned his master's degree—actually not one, but two. Opened up an accounting firm. Taught adult education classes. Became national commander of the Legion of Valor, a veterans organization. So he has earned his retirement, despite what he says. *[Laughter]* He's living outside Auburn. And yes, he is a fan of the Auburn Tigers, although I did a poll of the family, and there are some Crimson Tide fans here. *[Laughter]* So there's obviously some divisions.

But Bennie will tell you that he owes everything to the men he served with in Vietnam, especially the five who gave their lives in that battle. Every member of his unit was killed or wounded. Every single one was recognized for their service. Today we're joined by some of the men who served with Bennie, including Major John Bradford, the soldier that Bennie shielded in that helicopter, and Major Wayne Murray, the soldier Bennie saved from being captured. And I'd ask them and all our Vietnam veterans who are here today to please stand or raise your hand and to be recognized.

And now I'd ask that the citation be read.

[Lt. Cmdr. Malzone read the citation. The President then presented the medal, assisted by Lt. Col. Wagner.]

Over the decades, our Vietnam veterans didn't always receive the thanks and respect they deserved. That's a fact. But as we have been reminded again today, our Vietnam vets were patriots and are patriots. You served with valor. You made us proud. And your service is with us for eternity. So no matter how long it takes, no matter how many years go by, we will continue to express our gratitude for your extraordinary service.

May God watch over Don Sloat and all those who have sacrificed for our country. May God keep safe those who wear our country's uniform and veterans like Bennie Adkins. May God continue to bless the United States of America.

At this point, I'd ask our chaplain to return to the stage for the benediction.

[*Maj. Gen. Donald L. Rutherford, USA, Army Chief of Chaplains, said a prayer.*]

And at this point, I would welcome everybody to join the Sloat family and the Adkins family for a reception. I hear the food is pretty good. [*Laughter*] And once again, to all of you who serve and your families who serve along with them, the Nation is grateful. And your Commander in Chief could not be prouder.

Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:52 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Karen McCaslin and Kathy Sloat, sisters of SPC-4 Sloat. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the reading of the citations.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Medal of Honor :: CSM Bennie G. Adkins, presentation; Addresses and Remarks : Medal of Honor :: SPC-4 Donald P. Sloat, posthumous presentation.

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