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HONORING OUR ARMED FORCES

TRIBUTE TO U.S. ARMY STAFF SERGEANT HAROLD "GEORGE" BENNETT

Mrs. LINCOLN. Mr. President. I rise today to honor the memory of U.S. Army SSG Harold "George" Bennett. In the jungles of Vietnam, this young Arkansan displayed courage and honor while serving his Nation in uniform. Tragically, almost 40 years to the day, on or about June 26, 1965, he became the first American prisoner of war executed by the Viet Cong.

George Bennett was born on October 16, 1940, in Perryville, AR, a small town that rests just northwest of Little Rock in the foothills of the Ozarks. His father, Gordon, was a veteran of World War I, and he instilled in his sons the values and rewards of service to country. All 4 would follow his footsteps into the U.S. Army.

SGT George Bennett was trained in the Army as an airborne infantryman and served with the famed 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, made up of some of the finest soldiers in the world. He earned his Master Parachute Wings and Expert Infantry Badge before volunteering in 1964 for service in what was a relatively unknown area of southeast Asia called Vietnam. While deployed, Sergeant Bennett served as an infantry advisor to the 33rd Ranger Battalion, one of South Vietnam's best trained and toughest units. On December 29, 1964, they were airlifted to the village of Binh Gia after it had been overrun by a division of Viet Cong. Immediately upon landing, Sergeant Bennett's unit was confronted by a well-dug-in regiment of enemy forces and despite fighting furiously and courageously throughout the afternoon, their unit was decimated and overrun. Sergeant Bennett and his radio operator, PFC Charles Crafts, fell into the hands of the Viet Cong.

Before being captured, Sergeant Bennett twice called off American helicopter pilots who were attempting to navigate through the combat zone to rescue him and his radioman. Displaying a remarkably calm demeanor, his focus seemed to be on their safety and not his own. His last words to his would-be rescuers were, "Well, they are here now. My little people," his term for the South Vietnamese soldiers under his command, "are laying down their weapons and they want me to turn off my radio. Thanks a lot for your help and God Bless you."

As a prisoner of war, the only thing more remarkable than the courageous resistance he displayed throughout his captivity was his steadfast devotion to duty, honor, and country. His faith in God and the trust of his fellow prisoners was unshakable. Sadly, the only way his captors could break his spirit of resistance was to execute him and today Sergeant Bennett lies in an unmarked grave known only to God, somewhere in the jungles of Vietnam.

Recent efforts by a group of Vietnam veterans will ensure that Sergeant Bennett's valiant service will not be forgotten. Over the years, they have worked tirelessly on behalf of the Bennett family to secure the valor awards that should have been presented to Sergeant Bennett's mother, Pauline, in 1965. I am proud of all they have accomplished and have pledged my support to this effort. Most recently, their work helped lead to Sergeant Bennett's posthumous induction into the U.S. Army Ranger Hall of Fame at Fort Benning, GA, on July 8, 2004. Sergeant Bennett's brother Dicky, and his sisters, Eloise Wallace, Laura Sue Vaught, and Peggy Williams were in attendance. I hope this long overdue moment of recognition provided some sense of solace for his family. Although he may no longer be with us, the example and selflessness of this brave young Arkansan will forever live on in our hearts.

The 40th anniversary of Sergeant Bennett's execution offers us an opportunity, not to remember the events of his death, but to reflect upon the life he led and the kind of person he was. He was a selfless young man who answered his Nation's call to service and placed duty and honor above all else. While a grateful nation could never adequately express their debt to men such as George Bennett, it should take every opportunity to honor them and their families for the sacrifice they have paid on our behalf.

I would also like to ask for unanimous consent to include in the record the citation from Sergeant Bennett's posthumous induction into the Ranger Hall of Fame and an article titled "Bad Day at Binh Gia," by retired Army COL Douglas E. Moore, that provides us additional insight into the heroic service of SGT George Bennett.

Bad Day at Binh Gia

(By Col. Douglas E. Moore)

When friends or family visit for the first time, we usually take them to Washington to see the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Although I have been there many times, I am still impressed with the large crowds. Most are tourists with cameras at the ready; others appear to be more somber, perhaps because they served in Vietnam themselves or lost friends or family in the war. It troubles me to see fellow veterans there wearing all sorts of military attire from that era. Many of them have pain written across their faces, which makes me wonder what terrible burdens they carry after all these years.

For me, Vietnam is now a collection of mostly good memories. As a young medevac helicopter pilot, I had the opportunity to sharpen my flying skills to a level that was never matched again. I was blessed to be able to work with some of the finest people I have ever known, and my job was satisfying. During my tours in Vietnam and Japan, I evacuated more than 11,000 casualties in one of the best flying machines ever built, the Huey helicopter. It is gratifying to know that some patients lived because we were able to help.

The bad memories have mostly faded with time. In fact, there is only one event that I still think about, and it occurred more than 34 years ago. In late December 1964, we were rushing to join the crews of two helicopter gunships in an attempt to save an American advisor. Unfortunately, we failed.

Vietnam in 1964 was as different as night and day from the later years. Back then, it was still a Vietnamese war, and there were only about 20,000 Americans assigned to the various headquarters, advisory teams and a handful of aviation units scattered around the countryside.

Ours was strictly an advisory and support role and not one of direct combat. In fact, some of the senior officers still had their families in Saigon, and many Americans lived in hotels and other civilian buildings. The old-timers may recall a memo published by one headquarters stating its concern that some living areas were taking on the appearance of armed camps.

We operated on a shoestring. We did not have U.S. Air Force aircraft or U.S. Army artillery to prestrike the landing zones in support of our operations. The only firepower available was a few lightly armed helicopter gunships flown by a group of extraordinarily brave pilots. Needless to say, we left several of the landing zones littered with downed helicopters.

The communication systems were terrible. Since most medevac requests came by telephone and passed through several Vietnamese headquarters before reaching us, delays were common. On occasion, we would rush to a tiny village located a hundred miles away only to discover the casualties had been picked up a day or so earlier by a resupply aircraft making its weekly rounds.

All new pilots found it disconcerting that they could easily lose radio contact with other Americans during the longer flights. Weather permitting, the only alternative was to gain enough altitude to talk to our old standbys, Paris Control and Paddy Control, operated by the Air Force out of Saigon and Can Tho, respectively. Otherwise, we were completely on our own at times.

The character of the war was different, too. While there were a few major battles between the Viet Cong and South Vietnamese, most of the contact was on a small scale and ended quickly. It does not seem possible now, but the number of Americans killed in the war had not reached 200 until July 1964.

In late October, I was flying past Bien Hoa Air Base when several B-57 Canberra bombers suddenly broke through the clouds ahead of me. Several days later, I learned they had come from Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines to attack Viet Cong strongholds in the jungles north of Saigon.

The crews of the newly arrived Canberras had barely settled in when the Viet Cong struck. I was dozing in our alert shack at Tan Son Nhut Air Base when the radio operator began yelling, "Bien Hoa's been hit!" As we ran to our helicopter for the short flight to Bien Hoa, we could see flashes of rockets and mortars on the horizon.

Burning aircraft and ammunition were exploding everywhere as we landed to evacuate the wounded. To our horror, we watched a Vietnamese

A-1E Skyraider crash as the pilot tried to take off during the melee. The plane's huge engine and other burning parts rolled to a stop a few yards behind us. Four Americans were killed, several others were wounded, and 13 U.S. aircraft were destroyed that night in one of the first major attacks that seemed to be specifically targeted against the Americans.

Not long afterwards Bob Hope arrived for his first Christmas tour. While his group was traveling from the airport to downtown Saigon, two Viet Cong saboteurs drove an explosive-laden truck into the parking lot of the Brinks Hotel. Two Americans died in the blast and more than 50 were wounded. I missed Bob's show the next day because I was flying, but I understand that he quipped, "A funny thing happened on the way in last night—a hotel passed us!"

As 1964 was ending, the North Vietnamese apparently concluded that they could not win the war with the hit-and-run tactics they had been using. Instead, a major shift in their strategy occurred when they sent two veteran Viet Cong regiments to an assembly area about 50 miles southeast of Saigon. Coastal freighters brought new rifles, mortars and rocket-propelled grenade launchers. In the jungles of Phuoc Tuy province, the dreaded 9th Viet Cong Division was born, and Binh Gia was chosen to be its first test by fire.

Binh Gia was a peaceful village surrounded by jungle and populated mostly by Catholics who had fled to the South following an earlier partition of their country. In late December, one regiment of the 9th Division attacked the village and quickly overran its lightly armed defenders. Another regiment slipped into ambush positions around a nearby clearing. They knew the American helicopters would be coming soon, loaded with Vietnamese soldiers and their American advisors.

The casualty toll mounted quickly. About midafternoon, I took a load of wounded Vietnamese to Cong Hoa General Military Hospital in Saigon and was diverted from there to pick up an American who had been hit in an ambush about 40 miles to the west, near the Cambodian border. Because there was no tactical operations center or any of the ubiquitous command and control helicopters hovering over the battlefield, as was the case in later years, we had to refuel at Saigon and return to Binh Gia to see if we were still needed.

About 25 miles away from Binh Gia I began trying to contact other aircraft in the area. I switched through several frequencies that we had used earlier in the day before hearing a gunship pilot talking with an American advisor on the ground. It quickly became evident that the advisor was in trouble because the gunship pilot kept telling him he could not identify the disposition of his troops and was concerned about firing on "friendlys."

The advisor said he was sorry but that he had used up all of his smoke grenades and had nothing to mark his positions. At that point, the advisor began identifying objects on the ground in an attempt to guide the gunships. Finally, I heard him say something to the effect of, "Listen, I'm standing on a small mound near a large clump of bushes and waving a white handkerchief. You have clearance to fire anywhere more than a hundred meters from my position."

Shortly thereafter, the gunship pilot reported that he and his wingman had fired all of their rockets and had little machine-gun ammunition remaining. At this point, the gunship pilot told the advisor to begin moving toward the Southwest because he planned to land and pick him up. The advisor's response was quick. "Don't try it! They're all around me down here, and all you'll do is get shot down."

The gunship pilot encouraged him to move, but the advisor was adamant that it was too dangerous for any rescue attempt. After hearing this, I called the gunship pilot and told him we were about 10 or 12 miles out and would pick up the advisor if he could guide us into the area. The advisor answered first: "Negative; Dustoff. You can't make it, so don't even try it!"

I thought we had a chance because I remain convinced to this day that some of the earlier Viet Cong commanders would not have allowed their troops to fire at our medevac helicopters—whether out of respect for the red crosses or because they knew we went to the aid of anyone who needed help, I do not know. Many of the civilian casualties and pregnant women whom we had evacuated from the villages had husbands or relatives serving in the Viet Cong. As a result, I honestly believe they took it easy on us during the early part of the war. When U.S. combat units were introduced the following spring, we became fair game like everyone else.

In any case, my crew and I planned to approach at treetop level and touch down just long enough to haul the advisor aboard. We had already begun descending when we heard him say, "Well, they are here now. My little people [slang for South Vietnamese soldiers] are laying their weapons down, and they want me to turn off my radio. Thanks a lot for your help, and God bless you."

With those words, he was gone. The gunship pilot reported movement around the advisor's position, so we pulled up and began orbiting the area. The gunship pilot then told me that he and his wingman had to depart to refuel and rearm. I called an approaching Army L-19 spotter plane to ask if more gunships were on the way. The Bird Dog pilot said no.

The late afternoon sun began casting long shadows across the jungle clearing below us, and it looked so peaceful from our vantage point. At the same time, it was heartbreaking to know that an American soldier had

been captured and we were helpless to do anything except orbit outside of small-arms range.

Several minutes passed before our radio crackled to life again, "Have no fear, blue-eyed VNAF is here!" The call came from a flight of Vietnamese air force A-1E Skymaids, piloted by U.S. Air Force advisors. They were rushing to help but were simply too late.

I left Vietnam the following summer and spent two years in Japan before I returned to Vietnam. While in Japan, I was in another medevac unit whose mission was to ferry casualties from the air bases at Yokota and Tachikawa to several Army, Navy and Air Force hospitals scattered around Tokyo. After the more seriously wounded were sufficiently stabilized, we returned them to the airheads for the long flight home.

One afternoon, I was reading a copy of *The Stars and Stripes* while waiting for an inbound flight at Yokota. My attention was drawn to an announcement by the North Vietnamese government that an American POW had been shot in retaliation for the slaying of a Viet Cong terrorist by South Vietnamese forces. The article identified the POW as Army Sgt. Harold G. Bennett, who had been captured at Binh Gia.

It suddenly dawned on me that I had never learned the name of the soldier we were trying to save that afternoon, and I began wondering whether it was Sgt. Bennett.

I am still troubled because our rescue attempt was unsuccessful and I never learned the name of the soldier we were trying to save. I have often wondered whether it would have made a difference if the gunships had had more ammunition or if we had arrived a few minutes earlier. After many years of curiosity, I began trying to reconstruct the events of that fateful day.

First, I contacted the Pentagon's MIA/POW office and was referred to the Library of Congress. After obtaining several microfiche from the library, I discovered that three Americans had been captured at Binh Gia. Two of them were Army enlisted men and the third was a U.S. Marine Corps captain. While I cannot be certain, it appears the person whom we were trying to save was Sgt. Bennett.

The data I have gathered contains little information about Sgt. Bennett's actual capture, but there are several stirring accounts about his later actions as told by other POWs who were held with him in various camps. Their reports indicate that Sgt. Bennett stubbornly resisted his captors at every opportunity and that he participated in frequent hunger strikes. These disruptions may have led to his being shot.

Like most of my compatriots, I have witnessed many heroic acts over the years, but the person we were trying to save that day ranks with the most courageous. I cannot imagine what his thoughts were when things began to collapse around him, and there is no way to fathom the despair he must have felt while he was being led from the battlefield with American helicopters circling a few hundred feet overhead.

I am still amazed that he could remain so calm during his radio transmissions. To the end, his focus seemed to be on our safety and not his. The willingness to sacrifice himself instead of risking others was a remarkable demonstration of valor. If I ever have to face a life-or-death situation again, I hope I can find some of his courage.

STAFF SERGEANT HAROLD G. BENNETT

Staff Sergeant Harold G. Bennett is inducted into the Ranger Hall of Fame for extraordinary courage against numerically superior forces on the battlefields of South Vietnam, and for his conspicuous gallantry while held in captivity by the Viet Cong. While serving as a Ranger Advisor to the 33rd Vietnamese Ranger Battalion, SSG Bennett volunteered, on Christmas Day, to lead a seven man Ranger combat team on a helicopter (named the "Suicide Chopper") into a one-ship landing zone near the Cambodian border in an effort to free three Americans held captive by communist forces. Ranger Bennett and his snatch team landed and quickly worked their way through the camp. The VC had moved the prisoners prior to their arrival.

While this mission to liberate the captured Americans was not accomplished, in no way did it detract from the heroic efforts of SSG Bennett to free them. Four days later, on December 29th, 1964, SSG Bennett, with his American RTO, accompanied the 2nd Company of the 33rd Ranger Battalion on the first airlift into Operational Area of the Legendary "Battle of Binh Gia." As the rangers were being overrun by elements of the Viet Cong 9th Division, SSG Bennett remained on the radio refusing any attempt to evacuate him and his RTO from the overwhelming enemy forces and their firepower. After SSG Bennett's capture at Binh Gia, he was labeled a troublemaker by his captors because of his constant aggressiveness in the brutal conditions of the jungle POW camps. He verbally berated his guards, daring them to confront him man-to-man. On one of his three unsuccessful escape attempts, a Viet Cong soldier almost bit off SSG Bennett's finger as he punched the guard. Driven by dedication to duty, personal honor, and his religious faith, the enemy could not break him. In June of 1965, the Communist National Liberation Front announced that they had executed SSG Harold G. Bennett, reportedly in reprisal for actions of the South Vietnamese government; he was the "first" American soldier to be executed in Vietnam. Ranger Bennett's exemplary boldness, complete disregard for his own safety, and his deep concern for his fellow fighting men at the risk of his own life, reflects the highest traditions of the United States Army; his actions are the embodiment of the Ranger Spirit.