

Medal of Honor

A special category of hero

By JESSICA CHIA

Tribune-Herald staff writer

Staff Sgt. Salvatore A. Giunta, 26, is the first living service member to receive the Medal of Honor since the Vietnam War, according to the U.S. Army's website.

Giunta, an Iowa native who enlisted in the fall of 2003, showed promise from the beginning.

"He always knew his stuff, he was always a smart soldier, he always knew his job," said Spc. Christopher Izell in a video interview with American Forces Network Afghanistan.

Giunta and members of 1st Platoon, Battle Company, 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team, were stationed in the

THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN

Korengal Valley of Afghanistan in June 2007, where they encountered enemy fire daily and insurgents took advantage of the mountainous terrain with guerrilla tactics.

At nightfall Oct. 27, 2007, the 1st Platoon was ambushed by 10 to 15 insurgents, according to the military's official narrative of the event.

"They caught us in basically a textbook ambush, you know, basically an L-shaped ambush," said Sgt. William Burns of the 1st Platoon in the American Forces Network video, referring to a tactic where aggressors attack on one front, then sweep in from another front to surprise their targets.

When Giunta's squad leader, Staff Sgt. Erick Gallardo, got hit, Giunta rushed over immediately through heavy enemy fire, was able to transport him to a safer location and provided first aid, according to the military's narrative.

Two bullets hit Giunta as he helped Gallardo. Luckily his body armor stopped the shot that hit his chest, while the other merely glanced off a weapon strapped to his back, according to the military account of the firefight.

In the video interview, Giunta recalled what happened next.

He noticed Sgt. Joshua Brennan was separated from the platoon and determined to find him.

No man left behind

Giunta moved forward through enemy fire and fired at two insurgents he saw dragging away an American soldier he quickly realized was Brennan.

"I shot one guy and he dropped. By the time that guy dropped, the other guy was gone, Brennan's on the ground. Doesn't have his helmet, doesn't have his rucksack, doesn't have his gun, doesn't have the bottom part of his jaw. He's hurt, he's alive," said Giunta.

He comforted Brennan with talk of home to lighten the mood and kept him conscious, while Gallardo helped him administer Brennan first aid.

The rest of the platoon came to provide security as the

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For his actions in the war in Afghanistan, Staff Sgt. Salvatore Augustine Giunta was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor by President Barack Obama. He is the first living person to receive the U.S. Armed Forces' highest decoration for valor, the Medal of Honor, for actions that occurred since the Vietnam War.

Associated Press

enemy withdrew, and the ordeal was over, according to the official military account of the battle.

President Barack Obama presented Giunta with the Medal of Honor Nov. 16, 2010 for his actions that night.

Giunta said he was just doing his job. He humbly attributed all glory to those he served alongside, those who served before him and the heroes in his personal life, such as his parents, teachers and his wife.

"I'm not superhuman," Giunta said in the video interview. "God was looking out for me, I appreciate it, thank you, I was lucky. Not heroic, I was lucky."

The soldiers who served alongside Giunta tend to disagree with his assessment.

"It was unbelievable what he did that night. Like, I can't say how proud I am of him. He did exactly what he had been trained to do, and went far above and beyond. Had he not, a lot more lives would have been lost. A lot. We would have been

going places we had no idea even existed, nooks and crannies looking for people," said Gallardo in his video interview.

A leader by example, deeds

Those who know Giunta personally find his character just as impressive as his military actions.

"He's an amazing person. Awesome friend, awesome leader, he's always got everyone's best interests. And, like I said, real humble. He doesn't try and take credit," said Pfc. Garrett Clary.

President Obama said during the 2010 ceremony: "I'm going to go off-script here and just say I really like this guy. When you meet Sal and you meet his family, you are just absolutely convinced that this is what America is all about."

The Medal of Honor feature runs every other Sunday, alternating with "Voices of Valor," which focuses on Central Texas veterans. To suggest a story of a Central Texas veteran, email voicesofvalor@wacotrib.com.

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