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Vietnam vet is awarded Silver Star after 43 years

The Boyle Heights man hadn't received the medal for heroism because of lost paperwork. When the officer who recommended him found out, he doggedly worked to correct the oversight.



Daniel Hernandez, president of the Hollenbeck Youth Center in Boyle Heights, smiles as he gets a congratulatory hug. (Michael Robinson Chavez / Los Angeles Times / October 3, 2009)

By Esmeralda Bermudez

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It took 43 years, but Marine Pfc. Daniel Hernandez finally got his medal.

And when he did Saturday morning in Boyle Heights, the Vietnam veteran stood up straight and proudly puffed out his chest, his eyes glistening with emotion.

"His immediate and fearless actions, while himself painfully wounded, undoubtedly saved many lives," said Marine Lt. Jim Lupori, reading from the Silver Star medal citation that, because of lost paperwork, was never awarded to Hernandez by the secretary of the Navy after he left Vietnam in the late 1960s.

The four-decade wait only made the honor more meaningful to Hernandez, 63, as several hundred relatives, friends and fellow veterans gathered for a ceremony in his honor at the

Hollenbeck Youth Center. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-East Los Angeles) and a host of other state and city leaders attended.

They came in support of a man they had known for decades as a community youth leader and president of the Hollenbeck Youth Center, which provides after-school programs to keep children away from gangs and drugs.

Few knew Hernandez also was a war hero.

"There's a difference between action heroes in movies and action heroes in real life," said Schwarzenegger, who has long collaborated with Hernandez on youth issues. "Danny is a real action hero."

Hernandez was 20 when he served as a machine gunner with M Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division. The company, which was among the hardest hit during the Vietnam War, lost 17 men on March 5, 1966, during Operation Utah in Quang Ngai province.

That day, the citation notes, Hernandez dived through enemy fire to pick up a wounded Marine and carry him to safety. A bullet grazed his back. Still, he refused to be evacuated, and, moments later, when he saw an enemy soldier firing at a group of wounded Marines, he ran through oncoming bullets to kill the soldier and save his comrades. Another bullet later grazed his head, sending him to a hospital in Guam.

During Saturday's two-hour ceremony, Hernandez quietly looked on from the stage, now and then blushing and smiling timidly as two of his former supervisors retold the story in detail. Marines in the room, some of them former comrades who witnessed his bravery, cheered "Semper Fi!" and "Welcome home, Danny!"

Maj. Gen. John F. Kelly drove from Camp Pendleton to present the medal to Hernandez. "It takes a pretty special person to know you have a ticket out of that situation, and you still don't take it," he said. "Those men would have died had it not been for Danny."

Heroic as it was, the act was not immediately recognized by the secretary of the Navy.

Lupori, who was Hernandez's commander during the battle, recommended the young man for the medal. Lupori was soon transferred to another battalion and lost contact with Hernandez, but he always assumed that Hernandez had been awarded the honor.

Forty years later, Lupori found out that wasn't the case.

By chance in 2005, another Marine brought the two men together for lunch. When Lupori congratulated Hernandez on the medal, Hernandez didn't know anything about it.

"It was then I decided to do everything in my power to get him his medal," said Lupori, who believes the paperwork was lost in the military bureaucracy.

Then retired, the lieutenant from Akron, Ohio, spent three years preparing the application. It was all the more challenging because so much time had passed. He had to track down witnesses to verify his claim and explain the delay. He flew across the United States, enlisted the help of several high-ranking political officials, scoured the Internet and made countless phone calls.

Finally, earlier this year, Lupori was notified by the awards office that Hernandez's medal was approved.

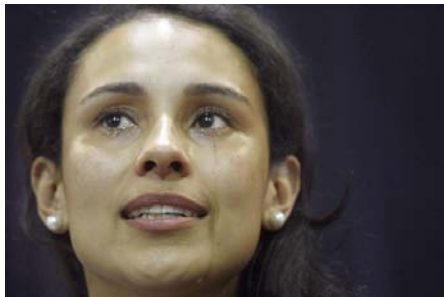
"I was elated and relieved," he said.

When Hernandez stepped behind the microphone, he thanked each of the people -- one by one -- who helped him receive the medal he now wore pinned to his black sweater. He dedicated the honor to all Marines and soldiers and the youths at Hollenbeck.

"In my company," he said. "I did not own valor. It was not exclusive to me. My company owned valor."

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Michael Robinson Chavez / Los Angeles Times / October 3, 2009
Daniel Hernandez's daughter, Priscilla, cries during the ceremony in which her Marine father was honored with the Silver Star for his heroism during the Vietnam War 43 years ago.



Michael Robinson Chavez / Los Angeles Times / October 3, 2009
A Marine Corps Color Guard places the colors at the beginning of the ceremony to honor Hernandez. Several hundred relatives, friends and fellow veterans turned out, along with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-East Los Angeles) and a host of other state and city leaders.