

OPERATION GUNNY

A Marine's Dedication to Honor SgtMaj John L. Canley

By John Ligato

Editor's note: The following is a personal account of one Marine's dedicated efforts to ensure the heroism of Sergeant Major John Canley was appropriately recognized. John Ligato's frustrations and anger at the process are evident throughout this article as is his perseverance and loyalty to his fellow Marine. His efforts came to fruition on Oct. 18, when SgtMaj Canley was presented with the nation's highest award for valor, the Medal of Honor, by the President of the United States, Donald J. Trump.

My Mission

There are three missing days in our nation's history. It's taken the last 13 years to add this lost narrative, and along the way, I've encountered apathy, naysayers, incompetence and bureaucratic pettiness. My name is John Ligato and on Jan. 31, 1968, I was a Marine lance corporal as-

signed to "Alpha" Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment. It was the Tet Offensive and I had the honor to witness the valor of two Medal of Honor recipients—up close—for three days. I have dedicated more than a decade of my life to ensure that history remembers these Marines and appropriately honors them for their valor and sacrifice.

Vietnam

We arrived at Phu Bai after being in the field for four months. Most of us had parasites in our belly, jungle rot, dysentery and attitude. After the 1967 siege at Con Thien on the Demilitarized Zone and our recent contact with the enemy at Quang Tri, we Marines were beyond salty—or so we thought. At Phu Bai, we enjoyed lukewarm chow, hot beer and cold showers after months of sloshing through rice paddies and sleeping with jungle critters. The air base seemed like paradise.

Sometime in the middle of the night, Captain Gordon Batcheller ordered Co A to "saddle up." I asked the captain where we were headed, and he said, "Going to help some CAG [Combined Action Group] up the road. We'll be back by noon."

Most of us never did return to Phu Bai. We were an undersized rifle company of 150 mud Marines. The bulk of Co A remained at Quang Tri and was scheduled to join us the next day. Awaiting us in Hue City were 10,000 North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars.

We rolled north on Highway 1 aboard trucks and eventually transferred to tanks. A short time later, NVA rockets, mortars and automatic weapons opened up from the west. Several of the tanks were destroyed so we jumped off and found a 3-foot-deep muddy ditch for cover. As we returned fire and tended to our wounded, my brain slipped back into combat mode and said, "This ain't so bad." I had no idea that it would get worse—much, much worse.

A Marine lay wounded on Highway 1 but NVA fire made any rescue a suicide mission. Our company commander, Captain Batcheller, was an All-American football player from Princeton University. He had taken command on Christmas Day of 1967, just some five weeks prior, so the jury was still out on him. It did not take the CO long to gain our respect. Capt Batcheller ran out into a hail of AK-47 rounds and shielded the prone Marine with his body. Four AK rounds peppered Batcheller's body, ripping flesh and bone from his leg, inner thigh and arm. Three of us dragged him from the killing zone, but my unofficial prognosis was imminent death. Captain Batcheller was slowly slipping into shock but continued issuing orders for a counterattack. The corpsman, Doc Ker, injected a few silver cylinders of morphine into the captain and his voice became a whisper. Captain Batcheller received a well-deserved Navy Cross but his severe wounds have plagued him for 50 years.

Enter "The Gunny." Gunnery Sergeant John Canley had already earned his combat reputation at Con Thien and Quang Tri. We witnessed the gunny ignore NVA



COURTESY OF KEN JORDAN

GySgt John L. Canley, left, and 2ndLt Ray Smith of Co A, 1/1 in Vietnam in 1968. Smith later retired from the Marine Corps as a major general. Canley later retired as a sergeant major and recently received the Medal of Honor.

bullets, mortars and rockets. His fatalistic philosophy was, "If today's my day, then come get me." Since our three second lieutenant platoon commanders were back in Quang Tri and Da Nang, Gunny Canley assumed command of Co A. His executive officer by default was Sergeant Alfredo Gonzalez.

The gunny gathered up the company and we continued north toward Hue City to continuous enemy fire from the west, but we still had that muddy ditch for cover and concealment. As we approached the outskirts of the city, NVA machine guns opened up from the north. An open rice paddy was to the east and the NVA blocked any southern retreat back to Phu Bai. Co A was now stuck in a deadly crossfire with no options, so we hunkered down and waited.

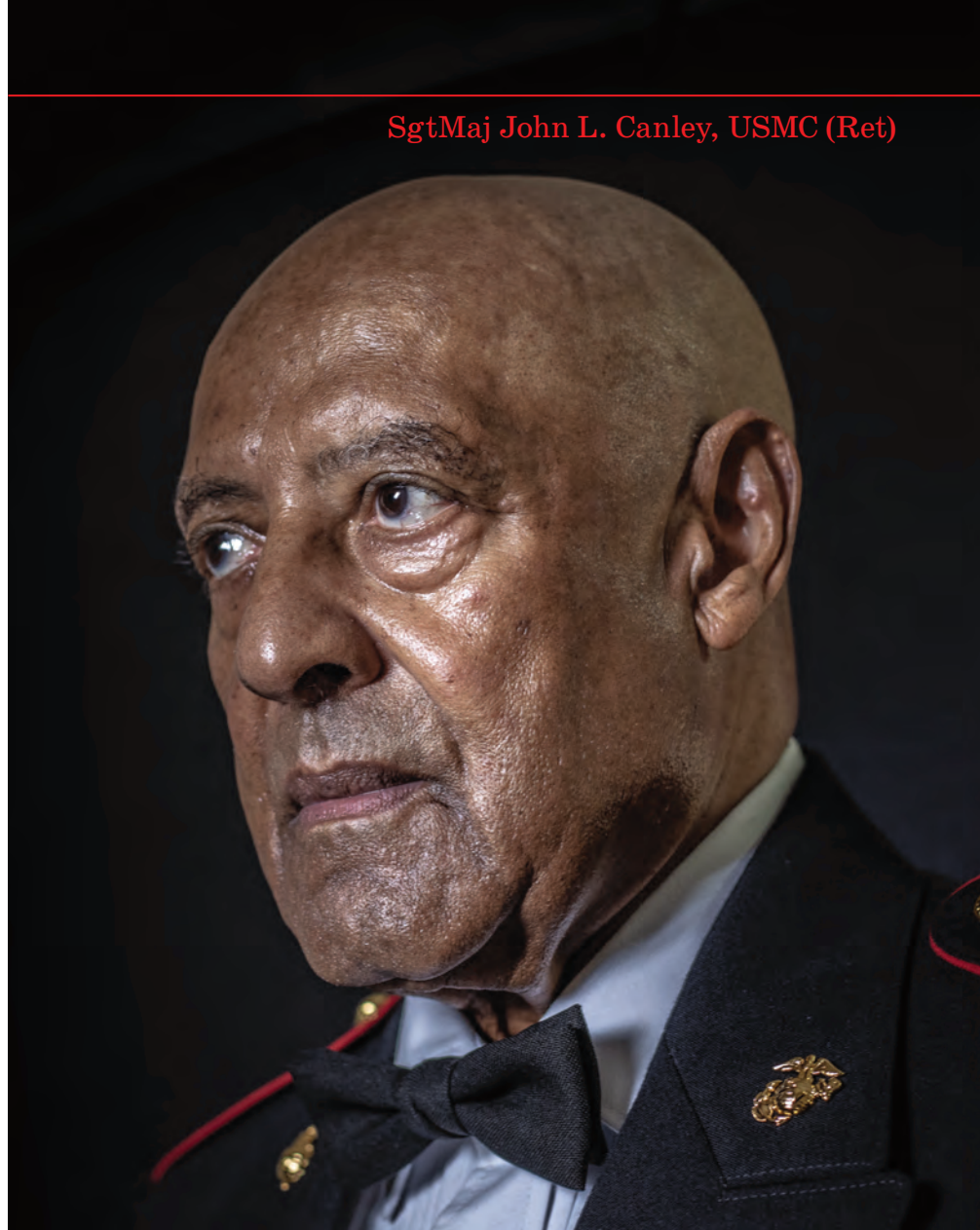
Gunny Canley and Sgt Gonzalez understood our predicament and lobbed a few LAW rockets at the machine-gun positions then headed out into the open rice paddy. They kept up a barrage of M16 fire accompanied with LAW rockets until they were in range of tossing hand grenades. They eliminated those NVA machine guns and cleared our path north into the city. Had they not taken that action, I would not be alive today.

Gunny Canley and Sgt Gonzalez continued those heroic acts day after day as the battle for Hue City lasted for 31 days. They distinguished themselves at the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) compound, the battle at the Han Hoi Bridge and the ferocious encounter at the St. Joan of Arc school on Feb. 4 where Sgt Gonzalez's heroism would later be recognized with a Medal of Honor (posthumously). SgtMaj Canley would later receive the Navy Cross for his own heroic actions during this period.

Co A Reunions

I returned home after a hospital stay in the Philippines. Since Vietnam was America's only replacement war, we didn't travel as units who trained, deployed and returned together. Vietnam veterans had no support system so most of us put the war in our rearview mirror. We rarely discussed the war with our friends, co-workers and family and I returned to college and buried my head in the sand. Most of my college friends weren't aware that I was a Marine and a Vietnam veteran.

Sometime in the 1980s and 1990s,



SgtMaj John L. Canley, USMC (Ret)

SgtMaj John L. Canley, USMC (Ret) was awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroic actions during the Battle of Hue City. (Photo by Sgt Erik Estrada, USMC)

Vietnam veterans began to reach out to their combat brothers and we slowly reunited. I was invited to one such reunion that took place at a bar outside the front gate of Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va. I had been stationed at Quantico, both as a Marine and an FBI agent, and was familiar with this particular dive. Predictably, we drank shots of whiskey and began reminiscing. Most conversations included the words, "The Gunny."

At about this same time, the battle for Hue City became fashionable and books began hitting the shelves at bookstores. The gunny refused to provide any first-person accounts of Vietnam but almost

every other Co A Marine spoke of Gunny Canley's valor. Their stories were not different perspectives of the same event but were their own unique eyewitness accounts of separate acts of gallantry.

John Canley is a humble and introspective individual. Canley was a primary author for Gonzalez's Medal of Honor citation, but with Sgt Gonzalez deceased, no witnesses were forthcoming to tell Canley's tale of those missing three days. There's a good reason for that oversight. Enlisted non-career Marines in Vietnam were not mindful of awards and decorations. Our goals for a tour in Vietnam were simple: get home alive and whole.

Enter "The Gunny." Gunnery Sergeant John Canley had already earned his combat reputation at Con Thien and Quang Tri. We witnessed the gunny ignore NVA bullets, mortars and rockets. His fatalistic philosophy was, "If today's my day, then come get me."

Even that proved difficult for many Co A Marines. The majority of the initial contingent of the 150 Marines who entered Hue City held the rank of corporal and below. We were not attuned to documenting acts of heroism, although at Hue City, I witnessed hourly acts of valor by Marines. Only seven Marines who entered Hue on Jan. 31, 1968, left that city unbloodied. The rest of us were on the quick track to military separation whether due to wounds, reassignments, early outs or death.

Many years later, I discovered that Gunny Canley had been awarded a Navy Cross for his actions at Hue, but even that had its bureaucratic snafus. Most of the award statements from Hue City were lost, and it took more than a year for Second Lieutenant Ray Smith, now a retired major general, to resubmit the paperwork based on actions after Feb. 2, 1968.

But there were still those three days that only we witnessed. Those were the three days when Gunny Canley's actions at Hue City indicate a Marine who, by all eyewitness accounts, exceeded conspicuous gallantry beyond the call of duty—not just on one occasion, but on many occasions.

An idea began to germinate in my brain when I attended a 1st Battalion reunion. When the Gunny walked into the hospitality suite, heads turned and all conversations ceased. The Marines of Co A gathered around Canley and began reminiscing. All had a Gunny Canley story and the majority

included Canley doing something heroic. There were six or seven eyewitnesses to the Gunny carrying wounded Marines to safety, the Gunny confronting enemy automatic weapon positions, and many testimonials of, "You saved my ass, Gunny."

It was time to officially document those anecdotal acts of valor and I volunteered to lead the effort. The biggest battle was never based on whether the Gunny deserved the Medal

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of Honor, it was simply persevering through the tedious bureaucratic land mines. So why did it take 13 years? Many retired Marines warned me that "they" make it difficult since the MOH is our nation's highest award for valor. I couldn't figure out who "they" were, but I had 13 years to figure it out.

2005-2008: The Beginning

In 2005 "Operation Gunny" commenced. Was it possible to nominate Sergeant Major John Canley for the Medal of Honor many decades later? That question re-quired in-depth research on the Medal of Honor. It included researching how to document those missing three days and inspire someone in authority to run with the ball. It proved an almost impossible task. One item not written in any policy manual is the Rules of Engagement.

My research confirmed that government guidelines require new eyewitness ac-counts as part of the process to request to upgrade a Navy Cross to the Medal of Honor. I found an example with Army Sergeant Benavidez who had his Dis-tinguished Service Cross upgraded to the Medal of Honor some 15 years later based on one new eyewitness account. At this point, the Gunny's clock was approaching 40 years.

I spent the majority of 2005 researching, seeking advice and making calls. The literature was confusing, my government inquiries were frustrating and my advice from retired Marine officers was basically, "Forget about it." Having served in gov-ernment for 37 years, I understood that I needed paper before any action occurred. I wrote my statement, which was especially significant since upon assuming command of Co A, Gunny Canley had ordered me to stick close to him. I had previously completed Vietnamese language school, and during those first three days in late January-early February 1968, we came across a variety of civilians and soldiers from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. It was total chaos and required some quick interrogations to determine friend, foe, or intel source. This placed me in close proximity to the Gunny during those initial days at Hue.

It took me three full years to locate Co A Marines who had scattered to points unknown. My contact guru was Sergeant Major Eddie Neas, USMCR, now retired, with whom I served when he was a lance corporal and a Co A machine gunner. Eddie became the unofficial historian for Co A and was the best source of information.

Finally armed with a few names and contact info, I began the journey. Many numbers were dry holes or disconnected, and some of my brothers had passed away. If I did connect with a Co A Marine, we spent time reminiscing about Vietnam. I eventually asked for their help, explaining, "It's for the Gunny."

I explained the three-step process of writing statements, getting them notarized and sending the documents to me. I love my combat brothers but sometimes, "No problem," involved frequent reminders and cases of



SGT DANIEL JEAN-PAUL, USMC

Vietnam veteran SgtMaj Canley, left, talks with a Marine officer during a Vietnam Veteran Pinning Ceremony, in Charlotte, N.C., on Sept. 7 during Marine Week Charlotte.



SgtMaj Canley, left, and a local boy pose for a photo after they participated in a physical training session during Marine Week in Charlotte, N.C., Sept. 7.

Again, I received no response so I looked for other legislators.

A radio commercial alerted me that Senator Sherrod Brown was being interviewed in a Cleveland downtown bar by personality Mark “Munch” Bishop. I arrived mid-interview and waited until Munch signed off then I approached the senator. Brown listened patiently and agreed to help while passing me off to his aide who gave me a card and said, “Give me a call and we’ll get the ball rolling.” I called and called and you guessed it. I felt defeated and convinced that the Gunny’s Medal of Honor packet would never even reach officials who could judge its merits.

2011-2014

In 2012, I moved from Cleveland to Jacksonville, N.C., home of MCB Camp Lejeune. I began golfing with many retired Marines. The consensus was essentially, “It won’t happen.” Many provided examples of failed attempts, including personal attempts, of securing valor awards years after the act. I showed a few my summary of action and their feedback was not encouraging.

I still required a legislator and heard that Congressman Walter Jones planned to address the Jacksonville Rotary Club. I decided I would give this Medal of Honor thing one more try and attended the luncheon. I had no idea what a Rotary Club did but as soon as Jones finished his speech, I approached the dais and went through my rehearsed pitch. The congressman nodded, agreed that Canley was a brave Marine, and referred me to his aide who gave me her card and said, “Call me.” I called and called and you guessed it.

I attempted another call to Congresswomen Bass’s office. The staffer I had previously spoken to was no longer there and I asked to speak to the congresswoman, but she was unavailable. I quit again and resolved that my efforts failed.

Five months later, the Gunny called. I hadn’t informed him that I had exhausted every avenue in my bureaucratic arsenal. I was both embarrassed and angry. The Gunny casually mentioned that he had moved to Oxnard, Calif., so as soon as we finished the phone call, I looked up congressional districts and determined that Oxnard was within the district of Representative Julia Brownley. I called Congresswoman Brownley’s office, repeating my abridged version of Gunny Canley’s valor in Vietnam, and the staffer

individuals going MIA for months at a time. I also met with some legitimate hesitancy from guys who had no desire to relive their combat experiences. After all, these Marines had participated in one of America’s bloodiest and fiercest battles. They witnessed horrors that most Americans only view on cable TV.

2008-2011

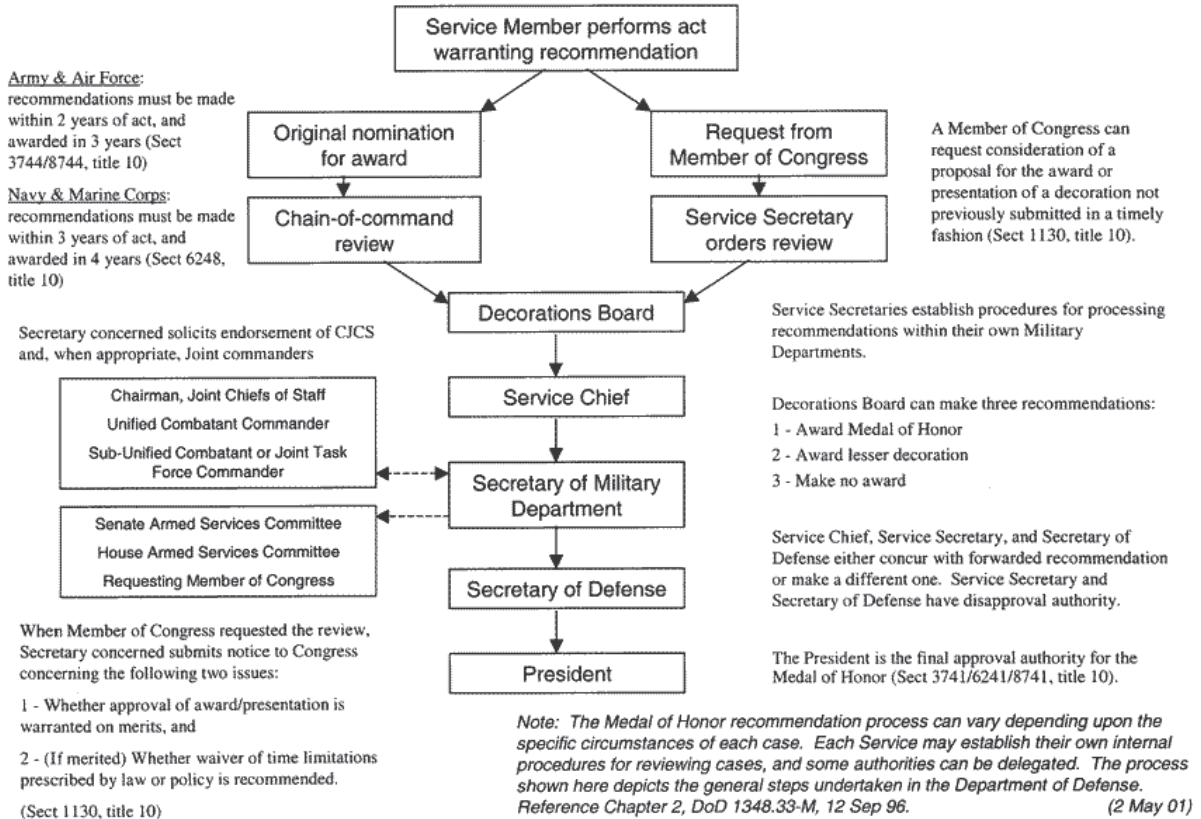
I received a few usable statements while others contained general praise of Canley but lacked specific acts of valor. Some were outside the time period. My plan was to keep reaching out to former Co A Marines while simultaneously locating a legislator to agree to sponsor the effort.

Canley was currently residing in the California district of Congresswoman Karen Bass, so I called her office fre-

quently and left messages. Finally, I spoke with a staff member who was outwardly cooperative, but basically had no idea how to proceed. I sent the staffer a thick packet including notarized statements, legal precedence for the 44-year delay, and a summary of action. When we spoke one month later, she repeatedly recited the submission criteria from a government manual while explaining the complexities involved in the process. It seemed as if she hadn’t read the documents I submitted which described in detail how and why Canley could have his Navy Cross upgraded to the Medal of Honor. Then the staffer went “underground,” not returning calls for close to a year. After many months of neglect, I sent an email asking her to please notify me if Congresswoman Bass had decided not to assist in helping me.

CPL CAREAF HENSON, USMC

Medal of Honor Recommendation Process: Procedures within the Department of Defense



requested I send the packet, which I did. Four months passed, and I called again asking for the veterans caseworker. Justin Rosa, who just happened to be a veteran Marine, was the new guy and he immediately understood the gravity of my request having had experience with the process of upgrading a Navy Cross to the Medal of Honor. He mentioned that the packet I submitted contained copies and he required original documents. Since I submitted the originals to Bass' office, I contacted them with the simple request that they forward the original packet to Brownley's office. Somehow all of the original documents disappeared, and my new mission was to reacquire original affidavits. This was not a quick or simple fix.

I called my combat brothers who had previously submitted notarized statements. Some were handwritten and some were computer generated, but for some reason, only one Marine had made copies. It took another 10 months to obtain original affidavits. The new packet was ready for submission to some government entity for evaluation. Justin had left Brownley's office in the interim, and the packet was eventually sent to Headquarters Marine Corps where it sat for a year. During this time, I'd contact Brownley's office asking, "Can you check on its status?"



Dreanna Perkins at The Marine Shop in Quantico, Va., assists SgtMaj Canley with his dress blues on Oct. 16, the day before he received the Medal of Honor at a White House ceremony.



LCPL DAISHA JOHNSON, USMC

SgtMaj Canley, back row, center, met with his fellow Marines from 1st Bn, 1st Marines, in McLean, Va., Oct. 15.

My concern, which I made known in every conversation, was that Canley was approaching 80 and had already battled prostate cancer. I made repeated attempts to speak with Congresswoman Brownley to no avail. I will admit to a few times when I'd raise my voice, "We're not talking about fixing a traffic ticket here, it's the ... Medal of Honor and it'd be the most significant accomplishment your congresswomen will ever do!"

2015-2018

After a year, I would occasionally use my "outside" voice on the phone and demand that Brownley's office conduct a status check. They finally made a call and discovered that the packet had been gathering dust on a desk for the past year. They were instrumental in encouraging Headquarters Marine Corps to conduct the appropriate review.

Laura was my new point of contact at Brownley's office, and my conduit to the bureaucracy. She would receive the frequent inane, absurd and ridiculous glitches then call me.

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... Laura countered,
"But they're dead."**

"John, I received a call from Captain M. and they rejected the packet."

"What was it this time?"

"The endorsement form you submitted was incomplete."

"No, it wasn't."

I had completed a government form that required the endorsement signature of every officer in the gunny's chain of command in 1968. This form took three

months to complete since there were 13 officers in the chain of command from the platoon leaders to the Commandant of the Marine Corps. Eleven of the 13 were dead, so I researched date of birth and date of death, and noted that information on the form. Colonel Batcheller and Major General Smith signed the form, so I thought this meant the mission was accomplished. Not so fast.

The intake officer at Headquarters Marine Corps stated that his checklist mandated all the required signatures before he could forward the packet to the Awards and Decorations Unit.

Laura countered, "But they're dead."

"Doesn't matter," the young officer explained, "The form is incomplete."

The packet was once rejected due to a lack of commissioned officers who witnessed the new and relevant information. My packet frequently mentioned that Co A had no officers for the period in question. They were medically evacuated or elsewhere.

This obvious lapse in common sense took several additional months to correct.



SGT ROBERT KNAPP, USMC

SgtMaj Canley renders a salute during a parade held in his honor at Marine Barracks Washington, D.C., Oct. 19.

Once the Awards Branch at Headquarters Marine Corps processed the upgrade, the packet was sent to the Commandant of the Marine Corps. The Commandant then forwarded his endorsement to the Secretary of the Navy. I was convinced that the Secretary of the Navy would forward the packet instantly since the Marine Corps has very stringent requirements for the Medal of Honor. I was wrong again. It sat at the Department of the Navy for close to a year.

During this time, I contacted everyone from a gunnery sergeant who just happened to answer the phone at Headquarters Marine Corps to staff in the office of the Secretary of the Navy. Every call included the caution that Canley was 80 years old with prostate cancer and it would be a national disgrace if he received this award posthumously. No one cared. They would never provide me a reason for the standoff. At the conclusion of every call I almost pleaded, "Could you please just check it out and get back to me? You can tell me, 'we're working on it,' 'a few more months,' or 'don't call me again.' " Every official promised to call me back but not one did.

It turned out that the Department of the Navy did not have a confirmed secretary for many months after President Trump

After the Senate passed the bill, a staffer from Senator Sullivan's office called and informed me that his immediate supervisor would not approach the senator since Canley was not his constituent.

was inaugurated and the acting secretary would not endorse the upgrade to the Medal of Honor.

When the Secretary of the Navy finally approved and sent the packet to the Secretary of Defense, retired Marine General James Mattis, he approved the upgrade in record time with the caveat that both the House and Senate must pass a bill waiving the five-year requirement. Laura cautioned me that this could take up to 10 months since they usually attach this type of bill to another bill. On Dec. 21, 2016, the House passed H.R. 4641, a bill

that would waive the five-year period on submission of the Medal of Honor once passed by the Senate and signed by the president.

In early January of 2018, I began contacting senators, including the three senators who were also Marines. I figured that they could speak with leadership for one of their brothers. I left messages with staff of Senator Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, Senator Dan Sullivan of Alaska and Senator Todd Young of Indiana. I patiently explained to their staffs how these Marine Senators could assist a Marine legend. I was not requesting they do anything official but just mention the situation to Senate leadership. "Could you please call me back and let me know if the Senator will help?" All promised a return call. Not one kept their promise but after the Senate passed the bill, a staffer from Senator Sullivan's office called and informed me that his immediate supervisor would not approach the senator since Canley was not his constituent. Congresswoman Brownley worked hard and helped push the bill through both houses in about a month. She has my sincere gratitude.

On July 9, 2018, President Donald Trump called SgtMaj John Canley to inform him that he would be receiving the Medal of Honor. The ceremony took place on Oct. 17.

Our history books may not be complete, but they will at least have those three missing days at Hue City when a Marine gunnery sergeant led his men against overwhelming odds and distinguished himself on the battlefield.

Author's bio: John Ligato is a retired FBI special agent and a veteran Marine who was with the initial contingent of Marines who entered Hue City on Jan. 31, 1968. John received three Purple Hearts for his service in Vietnam. He is an author and college professor. His latest book, "The Near Enemy," is a story of a few former Marines who become law enforcement officers and fight lone wolf terrorists. A book titled, "The Gunny," is now available on JohnCanley.com. It is an inspirational account of how 147 mud Marines led by GySgt John Canley entered Hue City on Jan. 31, 1968, with 10,000 NVA troops waiting.

Editor's note: A congressional office can submit a request for an award upgrade, but the request goes through multiple offices for verification and approval. Strict ethics rules prevent congressional offices from pressuring a federal agency to make favorable decisions for a constituent. 🇺🇸