

# Roger Donlon, 89, Vietnam War's First Medal of Honor Recipient, Dies



LINDA DAVIDSON/THE WASHINGTON POST, VIA GETTY IMAGES

Roger Donlon at the "Three Servicemen" statue at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., in 2014. In 1995, he visited the graves of the South Vietnamese soldiers under his command.

By TRIP GABRIEL

Roger H.C. Donlon, an Army Green Beret who in 1964 was the first Medal of Honor recipient in the Vietnam War, for leading the defense of a jungle outpost in a ferocious nighttime attack despite being wounded by shrapnel from mortars and a grenade, died on Jan. 25 in Leavenworth, Kan. He was 89.

The cause was Parkinson's disease, his family said in a statement. The statement said the disease was the result of exposure to Agent Orange, the toxic chemical sprayed by American aircraft as a defoliant in Vietnam.

Mr. Donlon was a career soldier who spent 33 years in the Army, rising to colonel. Before that he attended the United States Military Academy in West Point, N.Y., though he dropped out after two years, and became a Green Beret in 1963 after training at Fort Bragg, N.C., now Fort Liberty.

The battle in which he earned the Medal of Honor loosely inspired the climactic scene in the 1968 John Wayne movie "The Green Berets."

Mr. Donlon was a 30-year-old Special Forces captain when he arrived in South Vietnam to command an outpost at Nam Dong, north of Da Nang not far from the Laotian border. The mountainous region in the Central Highlands was populated by Montagnard villagers, whom Army advisers — and, before them, C.I.A. officers — tried to shape into a bulwark against the Vietcong, the Communist insurgency aligned with North Vietnam.

Ringed in barbed wire, Camp Nam Dong was defended by a dozen U.S. Special Forces and about 300 Vietnamese. In the early hours of July 6, 1964, a force of 800 to 900 Vietcong and North Vietnamese regulars launched a surprise attack, seeking to overrun the camp.

Years later, Mr. Donlon said that among the fighters the Green Berets were training were many Vietcong sympathizers. When the shooting began, he told the Congressional Medal of Honor Society, the attackers made an announcement over a public address system in English and Vietnamese telling the sympathizers:

"Lay down your weapons. We just want the Americans." He estimated that there were only 75 dependable fighters to defend the camp.

Running through "a hail of small arms and exploding hand grenades," according to the Medal of Honor citation, Captain Donlon "annihilated" enemy fighters who were attempting to breach the main gate.

During five hours of fighting, he was constantly in motion: laying down covering fire as his soldiers retreated, crawling with a 60-millimeter mortar to a new location and dragging a wounded soldier out of a gun pit. On separate occasions, he was wounded in the

stomach, left shoulder, leg and face.

Captain Donlon radioed for reinforcements. But when helicopters arrived from Da Nang Air Base, they were unable to land because of the intense firefight and returned to base.

"Without hesitation," Captain Donlon's citation reads, "he left this sheltered position, and moved

## Beyond Nam Dong Roger H. C. Donlon



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He wrote two books: "Outpost of Freedom" (1965) and an autobiography, above, (1998).

from position to position around the beleaguered perimeter while hurling hand grenades at the enemy and inspiring his men to superhuman effort."

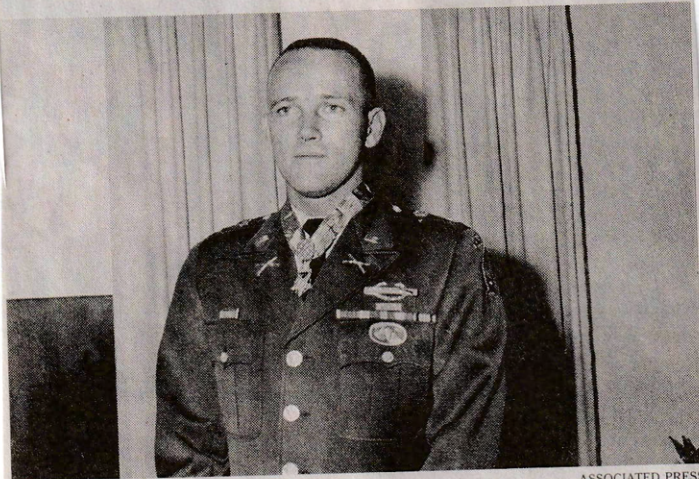
At dawn, when the enemy retreated, two Green Berets, one Australian soldier and 55 South Vietnamese defenders were dead, while the Vietcong had lost 64 men, according to an official military history.

Captain Donlon was awarded the Medal of Honor by President Lyndon B. Johnson at the White House on Dec. 5, 1964.

That year, with 23,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam, the administration was still dissembling about the American role in the war.

"This is the first Medal of Honor awarded to an individual who distinguished himself while serving with a friendly force engaged in an armed conflict in which the United States is not a belligerent party," a White House statement read.

Mr. Donlon's military career began when he enlisted in the Air Force in 1953. He was admitted to West Point in 1955 but dropped out after two years, taking a job with IBM. After 10 months, he decided that a corporate job was not for him, and in 1958 he joined the Army, graduating from Officer Candidate School as a second lieutenant at Fort Benning, Ga., now Fort Moore.



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Capt. Donlon wearing his Medal of Honor in 1964. Despite injury, he led the defense of a jungle outpost against a Vietcong assault.

After Vietnam, he earned a Bachelor of General Studies degree from the University of Nebraska at Omaha and a Master of Science in government from Campbell University, according to the military publication Stars and Stripes. He became an instructor at the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth in Leavenworth, Kan, where he continued living with his family after retiring in 1988.

He wrote two books: "Outpost of Freedom" (1965), about the battle for Nam Dong, and "Beyond Nam Dong" (1998), an autobiography that includes an account of returning to Nam Dong long after the war to promote reconciliation.

In retirement, he raised money for a scholarship fund for Vietnamese American and Vietnam-

### *A battle that loosely inspired a scene in 'The Green Berets.'*

ese students, and for building a children's library and learning center in the village of Nam Dong. He led a delegation to Vietnam in 1993 for the nonprofit group People to People International, where he served on the board.

Roger Hugh Charles Donlon was born on Jan. 30, 1934, in Saugerties, N.Y. He was the eighth of 10 children of Paul A. Donlon, who ran a lumber company, and Marion (Howard) Donlon. His father died when he was 13.

When Mr. Donlon returned to Saugerties in 2016 after its town hall was named in his honor, a former classmate of his, Jack Bartells, told a local newspaper that he "always wanted to be a soldier."

"He came from a military family," Mr. Bartells said, "and he and four brothers served in the military."

In 1968, he married Norma Shinno Irving, whose first husband was killed in Vietnam, after sitting next to her on a flight. She survives him, as do two of his brothers, Paul A. Donlon Jr. and Jack Donlon; a daughter, Linda Danniger; three sons, Damian, Jason and Derek; six grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.

In a 1995 return trip to Nam Dong, Mr. Donlon visited the overgrown graves of the South Vietnamese soldiers under his command who died in the battle. Beside him was Nguyen Can Thu, a former Vietcong political officer who had helped plan the attack. It was Mr. Thu, Mr. Donlon later said, who told him that 100 of the 300 Vietnamese he was training in the camp were Vietcong infiltrators.

Together, the two men cleared brush and righted some of the unmarked headstones. They were helped by Vietcong veterans of the battle.

"There I was, kneeling to cut the grass over the graves of my men, and all around me my former enemies were helping me do it," Mr. Donlon told The Kansas City Star in 1999. "That really solidified my feelings of reconciliation."