

THOSE WE'VE LOST

Bennie G. Adkins, 86, Dies; Honored for Vietnam Heroics

He was awarded the Medal of Honor in 2014 for bravery in battle and aided veterans in his later years. He died of the new coronavirus.

By Richard Goldstein

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This obituary is part of a series about people who have died in the coronavirus pandemic. Read about others here.

Bennie G. Adkins received the Medal of Honor, the military's highest award for valor, at a White House ceremony in September 2014. While he was mainly remembered for an extraordinary act of bravery in the Vietnam War, he devoted his postwar years to helping both his community members in Alabama and latter-day Special Forces troops better their lives through education.

As a Green Beret sergeant, Mr. Adkins played a major role in preventing the annihilation of his outnumbered unit when it was ambushed in March 1966 at its remote South Vietnam camp.

“During the 38-hour battle and 48 hours of escape and evasion, Adkins fought with mortars, machine guns, recoilless rifles, small arms and hand grenades, killing an estimated 135 to 175 of the enemy and sustaining 18 different wounds,” the Medal of Honor citation read.

Mr. Adkins was among the last holdouts among the American troops who were evacuated by helicopter before being airlifted out of the camp in a bizarre conclusion to the battle.

He liked to tell how a tiger that had evidently been stalking the combatants appeared on the scene; he surmised that the enemy had spotted it, too. “The North Vietnamese were more afraid of the tiger than we were,” he said. “They backed off.”

Mr. Adkins, who spent three tours of duty in Vietnam, retired from the Army in 1978 as a Command Sergeant Major.

He died on Friday at a hospital in Opelika, Ala., at 86. His son W. Keith Adkins, a physician, said the cause was complications of the coronavirus. He had twice been hospitalized since March, when he experienced respiratory problems.

After leaving the military, Mr. Adkins received a bachelor's degree and two master's degrees from Troy University in Alabama, in education and management, and founded an accounting firm.

He taught adult education classes to help others pursue college educational opportunities just as he had.

“He loved people,” Keith Adkins said in an interview. “He looked to give back.”

Three years ago, Mr. Adkins founded the Bennie Adkins Foundation to provide college scholarships to noncommissioned Special Forces officers to help their transition into civilian life. It has awarded about 50 scholarships to date, Keith Adkins said.

Bennie Gene Adkins was a native of Waurika, Okla., near the Texas border, and the son of a farmer. He was a longtime resident of Opelika, a city in east-central Alabama.

In addition to his son Keith, he is survived by his son Michael; his daughter, Mary Ann Blake; his brothers Gerrol and Jim; and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren. His wife, Mary (Arlington) Adkins, died in 2019, and his sons Dennis and Wayne also died before him.

When President Barack Obama presented the Medal of Honor to Mr. Adkins, he began by talking of Mr. Adkins's long devotion to service.

As Mr. Obama put it: “The first thing you need to know is when Bennie and I met in the Oval Office, he asked if he could sign back up.”

Those We've Lost

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