

DISTINGUISHED MEMBER OF THE SPECIAL FORCES REGIMENT



CAPTAIN HUMBERTO
ROQUE "ROCKY" VERSACE



Many believe that Captain Rocky Versace epitomizes all that the U.S. Military Academy at West Point stands for and lived by the code of "Duty, Honor, Country." Capt. Versace was a Special Forces officer who was executed by the Viet Cong while being held as a Prisoner of War.

Born in Honolulu, Hawaii, on July 2, 1937, Versace was the son of an Army Colonel, he grew up living on military bases and attending high school in both Alexandria and Norfolk, Virginia. He attended West Point from 1955 to 1959, and was commissioned in the Armor branch. After graduating from the Ranger School and completing Airborne training, he served in 1st Cavalry Division, which was operating in Korea. He then returned stateside to serve in the 3rd Infantry Division (Old Guard) in Washington, D.C. Under President John F. Kennedy's administration, advisors were sent to Vietnam in the early '60s, and Capt. Versace volunteered for that duty. Prior to deployment, he attended Vietnamese language school and completed training at the Military Assistance Institute.

In May 1962, he began his tour as an advisor in Vietnam, serving with the 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne). In May 1963, he extended his tour for another six months while making plans to get out of the Army and return to Vietnam to help the children. On Oct. 23, 1963, during his last month in service, his unit was attacked, and overrun. Although he was wounded, Capt. Versace, along with 1Lt. Nick Rowe and Sgt. Daniel Pitzer continued to fight until they were taken prisoner by enemy forces. During their captivity, they were starved and exposed to extreme physical and psychological torture.

Although wounded and weakened, Capt. Versace resisted captivity and lived by the Code of Conduct. He attempted escape four times and was seen by the other prisoners as continually resisting the captors, insulting them in their native Vietnamese and also in French. Over the course of 23 months he never broke, despite repeated torture and abuse. His physical appearance witnessed by his fellow prisoners showed that while his body was being broken, his spirit was not. He was finally separated from the other prisoners. The last they heard his voice he was singing "God Bless America", giving inspiration to his fellow prisoners and displaying incredible courage in the face of unbearable torture. On Sept. 25, 1965 on "Liberation Radio" the North Vietnamese announced they had executed Capt. Versace.

Lt. Rowe, also a prisoner for five years, overpowered a guard and became the first American service member to escape captivity. Rowe later documented Capt. Versace's story in the book *Five Years to Freedom*, and personally appealed to President Richard M. Nixon to award Capt. Versace with the Medal of Honor for his actions before and during captivity. President Nixon assured Maj. Rowe that he would seek the Medal of Honor for Capt. Versace. Lt. Rowe and Sgt. Pitzer founded the U.S. Army Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape, or SERE, program at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, based on their own experiences and Captain Versace's leadership and example before and during captivity.

Capt. Versace was nominated for the Medal of Honor in 1969, but the award was downgraded to the Silver Star Medal. In 2002, the "Friends of Rocky" were successful in getting Capt. Versace the award for valor above and beyond the call of duty. On July 8, 2002, President George W. Bush awarded Capt. Rocky Versace a posthumous Medal of Honor.