

# Book Reviews

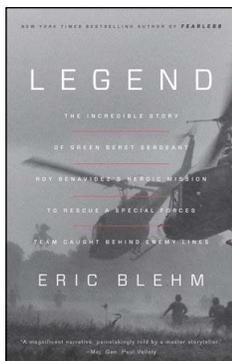


**Legend: The Incredible Story of Green Beret Sergeant Roy Benavidez's Heroic Mission to Rescue a Special Forces Team Caught Behind Enemy Lines**

**By Eric Blehm**

**NY: Broadway Books, 2015,  
288 pages**

Reviewed by LTC (Retired)  
Rick Baillargeon



In today's society, we seem to be very quick to bestow the title "legend" on a person. In many cases, the term is used arbitrarily with little or no understanding of what truly constitutes a legendary figure in a profession. However, when the members of a profession proclaim in near unanimous agreement that a person is a legend, then the moniker is rightly merited. This is unquestionably the case with Roy Benavidez, a Soldier who is revered as a legend in the Special Forces community. In his superb volume, *Legend*, author Eric Blehm highlights Benavidez's life and in particular his courageous actions during the Vietnam War.

For Blehm, his passion for crafting books tied to the Special Forces community is well established. His past two volumes were *Fearless: The Undaunted Courage and Ultimate Sacrifice of Navy Seal Team Six Operator Adam Brown* and *The Only Thing Worth Dying For: How Eleven Green Berets Fought for a New Afghanistan*. Each of these was well-received by critics and the public alike. There is no question that *Legend* will garner the same praise.

Within *Legend*, Blehm has deftly organized this volume into basically four parts. He begins with a concise retrospective of Benavidez's youth and early years in the military. He follows with discussion on the use of Special Forces in Vietnam and addresses the state of the war at the time. These sections perfectly set the conditions to focus on the emphasis of the book — the role of Benavidez in the rescue of his fellow Soldiers in early May 1968. He concludes the volume with the process of how Benavidez was eventually awarded the Medal of Honor and a summary of his life following his heroic actions.

For those who are not aware of Benavidez's actions, perhaps the best way to summarize them is to read part of his Medal of Honor citation. It states, "Only then, in extremely serious condition from numerous wounds and loss of blood, did he allow himself to be pulled into the extraction aircraft. Sergeant Benavidez' gallant choice to join voluntarily his comrades who were in critical straits, to expose himself constantly to withering enemy fire, and his refusal to be stopped despite numerous severe wounds, saved the lives of at least eight men."

Readers will find that Blehm superbly captures the essence

of the above words for readers. This is achieved by two attributes which the author has displayed throughout his previous bodies of work. First, Blehm conducts exhaustive research in support of his books. This research is not only rich in quantity but in quality as well. The sources he utilizes within *Legend* include recently declassified military records, interviews with Benavidez' family members, and discussions with surviving Soldiers who fought with Benavidez on 2 May 1968.

The second attribute is the author's ability to take this in-depth research and transform it into copy that will grip a reader. For those who have read Blehm's past books, you know he possesses an extremely engaging writing style. This is prominently displayed within the volume. In particular, this is highlighted when he focuses on the events of 2 May.

Blehm dedicates one of book's concluding chapters to describe how Benavidez was eventually awarded the Medal of Honor. He originally received a Distinguished Service Cross for his actions on 2 May. Blehm details the series of events which occurred (and the people who were involved) that led to upgrading the award to the Medal of Honor.

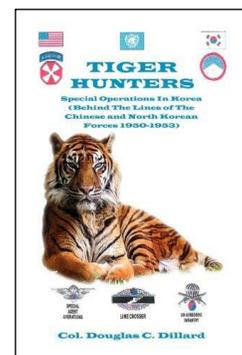
Benavidez passed away on 29 November 1998 of complications from diabetes. He continues to be remembered as a National Guard Armory, a West Point Conference Room, a Navy troop and cargo ship, and numerous other facilities are named after him. It is hoped that this superb volume will enable many others to learn and understand the incredible service he gave to his country.

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**Tiger Hunters: Special Operations in Korea (Behind the Lines of the Chinese and North Korean Forces 1950-1953)**

**By COL Douglas C. Dillard  
Bloomington, IN: Xlibris  
Corporation, 2010,  
368 pages**

Reviewed by Maj Timothy Heck,  
U.S. Marine Corps Reserve



COL Douglas Dillard's *Tiger Hunters* is part memoir and part historical scholarship about partisan and special operations during the Korean War. Based extensively on his experiences in Korea as a leader in the 8240th Army Unit, which handled unconventional warfare and partisan operations, Dillard's work helps fill the gaps in official histories and other special operations-focused histories of the war. *Tiger Hunters* provides an insight into the difficulties of fighting an unconventional war with limited resources, minimal training,

and in an environment that did not fully embrace either special operations or joint warfare.

The struggles and problems Dillard and his compatriots experienced serve as a reminder of the applicability and timelessness of the Special Operations Forces Truths developed long after the end of the Korean War. Dillard's history consistently reminds the reader that competent special operations forces cannot be created after emergencies occur. South Korean partisans, many of whom were refugees, were given minimal training, unclear mission orders, and were then dropped behind North Korean lines in an attempt to obtain intelligence and conduct partisan operations as early as August 1950. These partisans, understandably, suffered large losses and led to the reorganization of special operations in Korea and its slow professionalization. Despite the reorganization and expansion of training cadres, assisted by the disbanding of the Ranger companies at the division level in 1951, the partisan and line-crossing operations Dillard describes were still fraught with dangers.

Dillard divides his work into two sections. The first, which deals with airborne insertion of partisans, forms the bulk of the book. This section is largely based on Dillard's recollections of his time in the 8240th's AVIARY program, buttressed by historical research. The second section concerns line-crossing and tactical intelligence-gathering operations in support of division-level intelligence objectives. At the end of the second section, Dillard presents abbreviated recollections of the Korean and Chinese agents conducting both partisan and line-crossing operations in Korea.

*Tiger Hunters* helps fill gaps in the special operations picture of the Korean Conflict. As such, it has a place on special operations reading lists or in detailed studies of the war in Korea. Readers familiar with special operations and partisan efforts during the Vietnam War, such as those presented by Kenneth Conboy and Dale Andrade in *Spies and Commandos: How America Lost the Secret War in North Vietnam*, will find striking similarities to the problems that plagued partisan operations in Korea and Vietnam. In both, agents were doubled, teams were dropped to waiting enemy forces, and overall the operations saw limited success.

body of knowledge. Still others seek to pay to tribute to an event, an individual, or a group. Of course, seeking an objective and accomplishing an objective are clearly two different things. One recent volume which unquestionably achieves multiple objectives is *The Strong Gray Line*. It is a book which educates, ensures the service of our Soldiers and the sacrifices of the family are remembered, and pays tribute to the Soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice.

The focus of *The Strong Gray Line* is the West Point Class of 2004 — more specifically, the roles and experiences of the class during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. To address these roles and experiences, readers will find a book unique in organization, content, and its contributors. These factors combine to make this a volume which will have a dramatic impact on all who read it.

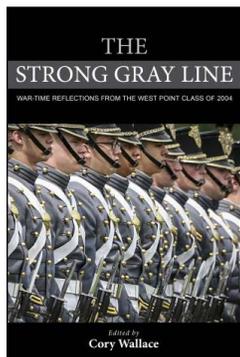
As highlighted earlier, this is a book which superbly honors Soldiers who died in service of their country. During the period of 2005-2012, 14 members of the class of 2004 were killed. Thirteen of these Soldiers died in combat and one in a training accident. To honor their memory, the first section of the book, entitled "The Fallen," contains an essay written on each Soldier. Fittingly, each essay is crafted by a fellow member of the class. Some of the essays are written in a solemn tone while others are a bit more subdued. They are fitting tributes to the Soldiers and undoubtedly humanize them to the public.

The majority of the remainder of the book keys on the service of these Soldiers during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It additionally highlights the significance of the family members left behind. In addressing this, the book utilizes 13 personal essays written again by members of the class of 2004 in a section entitled, "The War." These chapters truly touch on the myriad of emotions that are a part of war. In combination, they highlight the human dimension of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as any book I've read.

In between these two major portions of the book, there are two small sections which fit perfectly in the scope of the volume. The first is placed between the two chief sections and is appropriately called "Interlude." In developing this section, the editor wanted to provide readers with a bridge between the essays in tribute of the fallen Soldiers and class members discussing their Iraq and Afghanistan experiences. To achieve this, he placed two pieces (one a small story and the other a poem) which I believe clearly make this an effective transition for the reader.

The concluding chapter utilizes the reflections of a recent West Point graduate taken from his senior year. In it, he highlights the bond he passionately feels he shares with past graduates of the U.S. Military Academy. It is a chapter which not only interconnects the past and present as it pertains to West Point graduates but makes the connection between all who have served. It is a powerful conclusion.

After reading this review, you may conclude that *The Strong Gray Line* will only appeal or benefit those with a West Point connection. That could not be farther from the truth. It is a book which pays tribute to all who have served or currently serve their country. It provides the public perspectives and shares



***The Strong Gray Line: War-Time Experiences from the West Point Class of 2004***

**Edited by Cory Wallace  
Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, 268 pages**

Reviewed by LTC (Retired)  
Rick Baillergeon

Most books are crafted with the goal of achieving an objective or multiple objectives. Some seek to entertain their readers while others may be written to educate readers or add to their