

Heroes I Have Known (Part II)

My first encounter with Lewis Millett was in 1964. He was a Lieutenant Colonel instructor at the Command and General Staff College. I was a Captain student.
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"I hope you are not like that last guy named Dill who came through here. He was a genuine (expletive deleted)."

"I don't have any relatives in the Army," was my response.

I had no idea this gruff character with a handlebar mustache had been court-martialed for desertion, earned a battlefield commission and the Medal of Honor during his service to his country. During the year at Ft. Leavenworth, I learned to have a high regard for this unique, no nonsense, soldier.

Lewis Millett dropped out of high school after his junior year and joined the US Army in 1940. He wanted to go to Europe and fight fascism. He became increasingly upset with America's isolationism and deserted the US Army, going to Canada and enlisting in the Canadian Army. Shortly, he was in London manning an anti-aircraft gun during the Blitz.

When American troops began arriving in England in 1942, he took advantage of a provision that allowed allied troops who were American citizens to transfer to the U. S. Military. He served with the U. S. Army in North Africa, won the Silver Star and was promoted from private to sergeant. He fought at Salerno and Anzio. It was at Anzio that his old army records caught up with him. He was told that he had been court-martialed and found guilty of desertion. His sentence was a \$52 fine. The same day he received a battlefield promotion to lieutenant for his fearlessness in combat.

Millett went to college and joined the Maine National Guard after the war ended. With the outbreak of the Korean War, he joined the 8th Field Artillery of the 25th Division and was sent to Korea. Not long after his arrival, the commanding officer of an infantry company was killed and Millett was given command. On Feb. 7, 1951, he was in command of an under-strength company of about one hundred soldiers. Proceeding up a road in sub-zero temperatures, they ran into a superior force of Chinese Communist soldiers dug into the hills above.

One of Millett's platoons was pinned down by automatic weapons fire. He brought up another platoon for support. Pinned down for hours, his men began running low on ammunition. He ordered them to fix bayonets and led a charge up the hill. Millett with his large red handlebar mustache was first to reach the trench line at the top of the hill and immediately bayoneted two enemy soldiers. Then, using his rifle as a club against the others, he forced the Chinese to break and run.

Millett was wounded by grenade fragments but refused evacuation until his position was secured. He had trained his troops in use of the bayonet and later explained that he engaged in this action in honor of both of his grandfathers who had participated in bayonet charges during the War Between the States.

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Millett was pulled off the line a few weeks later. When he complained and asked why, he was informed that he had been recommended for the Medal of Honor and his commanders didn't want him to get killed before the ceremony.

President Harry Truman presented the Medal of Honor, July 5, 1951.

After Korea, Millett attended Infantry Officers Advanced Course and Ranger School as a Major. He became involved in Special Operations with the 101st Airborne Division.

During the Vietnam War, he helped establish the Vietnamese Ranger School and Commando training programs in Laos. At the time of his retirement in 1973, he was the only colonel in U. S. military history to have been found guilty of desertion.

Millett lived in Charlotte, North Carolina, during the 1980's and participated in at least one Armed Forces Day parade in Spartanburg. More recently he was residing with a daughter in California.

It has been a distinct privilege to know authentic heroes such as Lewis L. Millett.