

Congressman Labrador joins veterans in honoring Atwell's gallantry during 1967 fight in Vietnam

POST FALLS – Congressman Raúl Labrador, R-Idaho, presented the Silver Star -- the military's third-highest decoration for valor -- to Sgt. Michael Atwell at a ceremony Wednesday at the American Legion Hall in Post Falls.

Labrador's office assisted Atwell, 65, of Osburn, in obtaining the award. Two of Atwell's colleagues, Col. Ron Leonard and Maj. Larry Moore, came to Labrador for help last year.

"It is at last time to recognize this soldier's extraordinary courage and valor," said Leonard, who traveled to the ceremony from Fairfax Station, Va.

"This day has been long coming," said Moore, of Knoxville, Tenn. "Mike Atwell is a brave soldier."

Moore and Leonard described Atwell as quiet and effective. Accepting the award, Atwell was brief: "I'm not going to say a lot. We had a lot of good people. This Silver Star is for all of them – couldn't have done it without them."



Labrador noted that he was born two weeks after the battle for which Atwell was honored. "Because of men like you and all of you who are here, I was born into a free nation," Labrador said.

Leonard and Moore began collecting records about the Battle of Dak To in 2011, submitting an application for the award to the Army in 2012. Early in 2013, they brought the matter to Labrador, whose veterans' affairs specialist Tori Shockey took the case. Shockey helped revise the application and on June 26, 2014, Secretary of the Army John McHugh approved the award.

“God bless her,” Leonard said of Shockey.

During the Nov. 20 to Nov. 23, 1967, battle Atwell was 18 years old. Operating from an exposed forward position, he delivered “continuous devastating fire on the enemy,” according to the Army citation. “Atwell endured wave after wave of enemy counterattacks” for three days, “which ultimately allowed friendly forces to secure Hill 875.”

“Private First Class Atwell’s gallantry in action is in keeping with the finest traditions of military service and reflects great credit upon himself, the 503d Airborne Infantry Brigade and the United States Army,” says the citation. Atwell’s Company B was outnumbered by a ratio of 7-to-1.

After a 6-year Army Career, Atwell worked for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. His postings included Mountain Home Air Force Base and the Eastern Environmental Office in Kellogg. He was twice deployed to Iraq and twice to Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina. Atwell retired from the Corps in 2011.

Dan Popkey