

BILL ANALYSIS

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AUTHOR'S / SPONSOR'S STATEMENT OF INTENT

The Medal of Honor is the nation's highest decoration for valor in combat awarded to members of the United States armed forces. Generally presented to recipients by the president of the United States on Congress's behalf, it is often called the Congressional Medal of Honor.

First authorized in 1861 for United States Navy and Marine Corps personnel and for United States Army soldiers the following year, Medals of Honor are awarded sparingly and bestowed only on those individuals performing documented acts of gallant heroism against an enemy force.

Since Congress authorized the award, 70 Medals of Honor have been accredited to the State of Texas, yet other Texans have similarly distinguished themselves by acts of courageous gallantry in combat no less deserving of such recognition. One such individual is Marcelino Serna, a native of Mexico whose unflinching and selfless bravery and acts of uncommon valor on the battlefields of World War I made him one of Texas' most decorated heroes.

Born in the Mexican State of Chihuahua in 1896, he came to the United States as a young man in search of a better life, working various jobs in Texas, Kansas, and Colorado.

In 1917, Mr. Serna was working in Colorado when the United States, unable to remain neutral any longer while war raged in Europe, declared war on Germany. Later that year, federal officials in Denver, Colorado, gathered a group of men and held them until their draft status could be verified.

Included in that group, Mr. Serna chose not to wait for such verification and instead volunteered for service in the United States Army. After only three weeks of training, 20-year-old Private Serna was shipped to England, where he was assigned to the 355th Infantry of the 89th Division, a unit that was to see action in some of the most arduous campaigns of the war.

By the time the unit arrived in France, Private Serna's status as a noncitizen had come to light, and he was consequently offered a discharge from the army. Given the opportunity to return home, Private Serna refused the discharge, choosing to stay with his unit as it began its advance toward the Meuse River and Argonne Forest in northeastern France.

At Saint Mihiel, Private Serna's unit was moving through thick brush when a German machine gunner opened fire, killing 12 American soldiers. With his lieutenant's permission, Private Serna, a scout, continued forward, dodging machine-gun fire until he reached the gunner's left flank.

Having come through a hail of bullets unscathed, despite being hit twice in the helmet, Private Serna got close enough to lob four grenades into the machine-gun nest, killing six enemy soldiers and taking into custody the eight survivors, who quickly surrendered to the lone American soldier.

This encounter was followed shortly by an even more astounding feat when, during his second scouting mission in the Meuse-Argonne campaign, Private Serna captured 24 German soldiers with his Enfield rifle and grenades, an episode that began when he spied a sniper walking on a trench bank.

Although the sniper was about 200 yards away, Private Serna shot and wounded him, then followed the wounded German's trail into a trench, where he discovered several more enemy

soldiers. Opening fire, Private Serna killed three of the enemy and scattered the others in that initial burst.

Frequently changing positions, Private Serna fooled the enemy into thinking they were under fire from several Americans, keeping up the ruse until he was close enough to lob three grenades into a German dugout. In about 45 minutes of furious action, Private Serna managed to kill 26 German soldiers and capture another 24, whom he held captive by himself until his unit arrived.

Enduring several months of combat action largely unharmed, Private Serna was shot in both legs by a sniper four days before the armistice. While he was convalescing in an army hospital in France, General John J. Pershing, commander-in-chief of the American Expeditionary Forces, decorated Private Serna with the Distinguished Service Cross, the second highest American combat medal.

Private Serna also received two French Croix de Guerre with Palm medals, the French Medaille Militaire, the French Commemorative Medal, the British Medal of Honor, the Italian Cross of Merit, the World War I Victory Medal with five stars, the Victory Medal with three campaign bars, the Saint Mihiel Medal, the Verdun Medal, and two Purple Hearts.

Discharged from the army in 1919, Marcelino Serna settled in El Paso, where he became a United States citizen, entered the civil service, and lived out his retirement years until his death in 1992. Although he lived the most ordinary of lives after the war, Mr. Serna was, for a brief moment in time, an extraordinary hero whose remarkable feats of bravery under fire elevated him into the pantheon of American heroes.

In 1993, Texas Congressman Ronald D. Coleman introduced a measure in the 103rd Congress to waive certain statutory time limits on awarding the Medal of Honor and thus bestow on Marcelino Serna the proper recognition he so richly deserves. Unfortunately, the measure did not receive a proper hearing, thereby denying the legacy of Mr. Serna its proper place in history.

RESOLVED

That the 81st Legislature of the State of Texas hereby respectfully urge the Congress of the United States to reopen consideration of this case to posthumously award the Medal of Honor to World War I hero Marcelino Serna.

That the Texas secretary of state forward official copies of this resolution to the president of the United States, to the speaker of the house of representatives and the president of the senate of the United States Congress, and to all the members of the Texas delegation to the congress with the request that this resolution be officially entered in the Congressional Record as a memorial to the Congress of the United States of America.