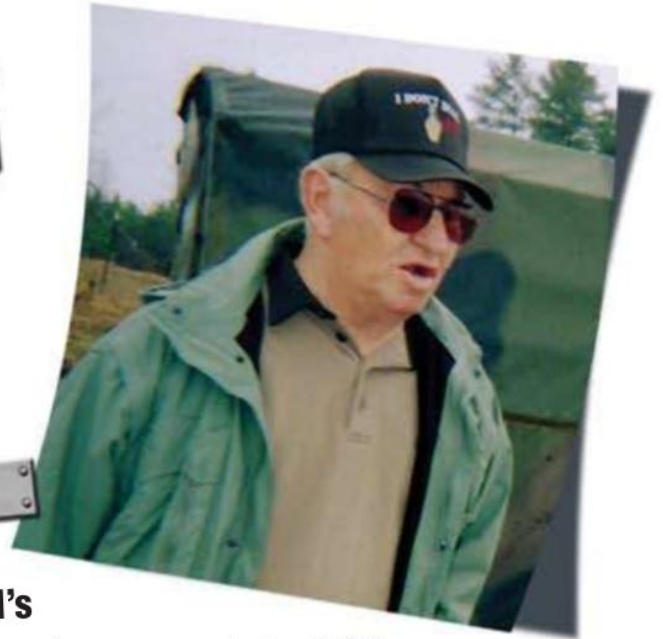


HARD AS NAIL



Retired Sergeant Major Richmond Nail's SERE career spans three decades Story by Janice Burton

Richmond Nail may have a hard time figuring out how not to be in the Army. Nail, an Arkansas native, joined the Army when he was 18. In June, Nail, now 71 years old, retired as an instructor at the United States Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School's Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape, or SERE, school after more than 53 years in service to the United States.

"Anyone who has spent time in the SERE course, on the SERE committee or at Camp Mackall knows a Richmond Nail story," said Major Brian Hankinson, the former SERE commander, now the S3 of 5th Battalion, 1st Special Warfare Training Group.

Hankinson is the first to admit that some of the stories have grown because of embellishment over the years, but they are rooted in fact and reflect the exploits of a man Hankinson calls a "true American hero."

Nail doesn't use words like that to describe himself. Instead, he prefers to talk about others, or as was the case during a recent visit to the Green Beret Club, let others talk for him. "He's a legend," said one of his retired Special Forces friends. "Everybody knows Richmond. He helped start the SERE school."

And that is a fact. In 1982, Nail was one of a handful of people selected by Lieutenant Colonel Nick Rowe to help stand up the SERE school. The decision by Rowe was only logical: Nail had spent seven years at the Special Warfare Center as the Phase I

instructor of the Special Forces Basic Enlisted Division, where he personally wrote every lesson plan, set up a jungle-training lane and wrote the RECONDO course.

In 1982, when Rowe was preparing to start the school, Nail was a team sergeant with the 5th Special Forces Group. "I got a call from Rowe, and he said, 'I want you to come to work for me.' I only had 18 months left, but I went to work for him, and I made sergeant major," said Nail.

During that time, Nail took the lesson plans from his first SWCS job and tailored them for the new school Rowe was creating. Nail honed in on the survival aspect of the SERE training, creating lesson plans that zeroed in on poisonous plants, ropes and knots, infiltration and extraction techniques. He also set up some landmark obstacles at Camp Mackall and helped implement some of the hallmarks of the course — barriers, wires, a slide for life and the implementation of an aggressor force.

As his time in the Army came to a close in 1984, Nail prepared his family for a move to Houston, Texas — but that didn't happen. He dropped by Camp Mackall to say his farewells to friends and encountered Rowe. "At that time, I had basically been an instructor at SERE for about five years," he recalled. "I had a job waiting for me in Houston, but while I was visiting out at Camp Mackall, I went by to see Colonel Rowe, and he said, 'Why don't you come work for me (as a civilian)?' I

thought about it and I did it, and now, 22 years later, I'm retiring."

After having spent almost what most people consider a career at SERE, Nail still loves it. "I'm going to miss seeing these young students who come straight off the streets into SF," he said. "They are really doing a super job. I've always encouraged the guys to try and do a good job. I try to encourage them to have a sense of urgency and maturity — that will get you a long way. I tell them they have got to be motivated."

And while Nail only taught those things at SERE school, he lived them during his own Army career. He received his first Bronze Star Medal with a V device when he was 31; the second when he was 54 for actions that had occurred more than a decade earlier.

In 1966, Nail was serving in the 101st Airborne Division's Artillery. The division was conducting combat operations in Vietnam, and Nail was the acting artillery NCO. When his battery came under heavy fire, Nail exercised the maturity and urgency that he strove to instill in his students. Nail's battery was attacked by an overwhelming Viet Cong force. According to his award citation, "Nail fearlessly exposed himself to heavy enemy fire and grenades in order to place direct howitzer fire on the enemy. He acted with calm courage when he personally dove on an enemy grenade which had landed between two of his men and threw it from the parapet before it could explode."

If that wasn't enough, Nail, realizing his men were running low on ammunition, braved enemy fire again to reach the ammunition bunker to resupply his troops, killing three Viet Cong soldiers along the way. Nail doesn't necessarily see his actions as heroic; instead, he sees them as simply getting the job done.

Ask him about heroes, and he'll tell you about the men he served with in the 82nd Airborne Division when he was a young private. "After World War II, that's where you would find a bunch of heroes," he said. "The 82nd is where you would find all the guys who fought in combat in the war."

It was there he met the man who became his mentor. "Sergeant Major Frank Creed was just a corporal in the 82nd then," he said. "But he was my squad leader, and he encouraged me a lot."

That encouragement is what drove Nail to join the ranks of the elite Soldiers in Special Forces. "I worked with Special Forces a lot in Germany and in Vietnam," he said, and following his year in combat in Vietnam, he went through the SF training in 1967, knowing that would ensure a ticket back to Vietnam.

After completing SF training, Nail returned to Vietnam in 1969. He was a member of MIKE Force Team B55. On March 17, 1969, Nail's team was working with 200 Montagnard tribesmen in the hills of central Vietnam when they came under fire. Realizing the team needed help, Nail, then a sergeant first class, volunteered to go for help, even though the odds were against him. "Ignoring the danger, he immediately began moving through the hail of machine-gun and sniper fire until he was seriously wounded and unable to move further. Despite being in severe pain, he continued to encourage his comrades until they eventually were able to reach safety," reads the second citation for the Bronze Star Medal, which was presented to Nail 20 years after the fact.

Nail's wounds were, according to the U.S. Army, enough to take him out of the game. But he wasn't prepared to go. After a lengthy recovery at Walter Reed Army Hospital, Nail was told that he was going to receive a medical discharge, something he fought — even though he had lost an eye and a kidney. "They gave me a PT

test, and I passed it," he recalled. "So they sent me out to Camp Mackall because they needed instructors. There were a lot of people coming through because of the war, and a lot of the people running the camp were wounded in Vietnam."

He stayed on as an instructor until 1975, when he went to 5th Group as a team sergeant. "We went everywhere and did everything from skiing to mountain climbing to water training," he recalled. "That's where I first met Colonel Rowe. He was a lieutenant in the group."

Nail speaks fondly of Rowe and his drive to start the school. "He went to the Department of the Army and convinced them they needed the SERE school," he said. "It was initially supposed to be run by A-teams, but they wouldn't buy it. So the first classes were taught by instructors from the 82nd Airborne Division. But Rowe was determined, and he went around hiring instructors. The first person he hired was Sergeant Major Howard Allen — I was the second or third guy he hired, and we put SERE together."

Nail said that from the first iteration, the course has only gotten better. "If Colonel Rowe were alive, he would be super proud of the SERE school today."

Nail is just as proud of the school and his legacy there. "I'm going to miss the students and teaching them," he said. "It's something I've always loved doing — but it was time to go."

For the cadre left behind at the SERE school, Nail's presence is going to be missed. "Up until the late '90s, students in the SERE school frequently saw Richmond negotiating the treacherous barriers, egging the timid students around, over, under and through the obstacles," said Hankinson. "He was leading and intimidating them on to mission accomplishment, and he was in his 60s. The warrior spirit has not faded over the years." **SW**

All photos courtesy Richmond Nail.

