

## WHAT'S IN A NAME? EVERYTHING



Perry Benally stands surrounded by names at the Gallup Veterans Memorial on the Courthouse Plaza, but his name is not among them although he served in Vietnam.

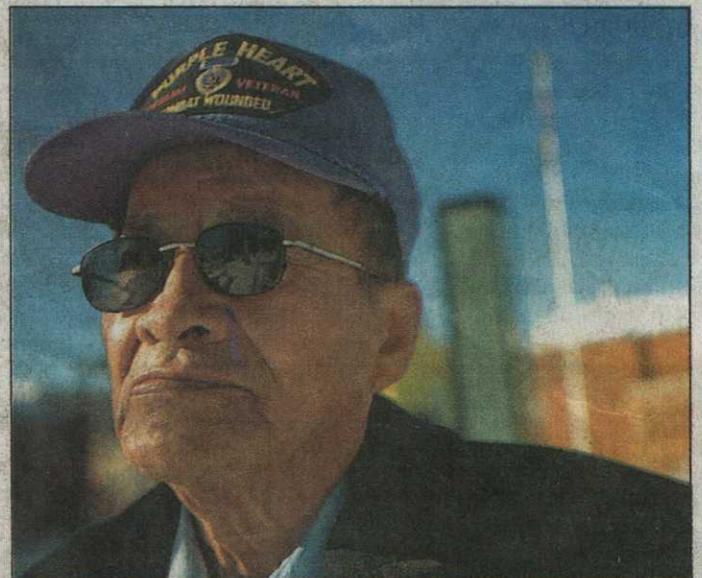
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# JUST HONOR

*E-mail reunites Vietnam vet with war buddies; fellow vets advocate for Benally's Silver Star*

By Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola  
Independent correspondent

**G**ALLUP — If there were good things that came out of Perry V. Benally's harrowing tour of duty in Vietnam, one thing has to be the strong bond of brotherhood that was forged on the battlefield. That bond once saved his life on Dec. 16, 1967, when a seriously injured Benally, missing in action, was found by his fellow American soldiers and medevacked to a military hospital for treatment. Forty-three years later, some of those same men found Benally again and began to advocate for him to be



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Benally discovered one of his old war buddies wrote a book about serving in Vietnam and a lot of information about Benally is in the book.

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## Just honor

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properly recognized for his heroic actions in Vietnam.

And linking those two events together was an unexpected e-mail from a woman in Indiana.

In an interview on Thursday, Benally, a disabled veteran and retired social worker from Tohatchi, talked about his experiences in Vietnam and the surprising turn of events in his life over the past couple of years.

"God works in mysterious ways," Benally said of the circumstances surrounding the e-mail from Indiana.

It was sent on Aug. 14, 2009, by LaVerna VanDan, whose husband, Alan, had served with Benally in Vietnam. But it had not been sent to Benally, it had been sent to Rehoboth Christian School, whose website listed Benally as a school board member.

"Several of the men who served with this man have been looking for him," VanDan wrote in her e-mail. "Apparently he was supposed to be awarded with a medal while in Vietnam but was wounded and may not have received this recognition.

"We have looked for years in the hope that we can find Mr. Benally and know that he lives in New Mexico and is a member of the Navajo Nation," Van-

Dan said. "That is as far as we have gotten until I spotted Mr. Benally's name on a page mentioning your school."

Three days later, Rehoboth officials placed the e-mail in Benally's hands. It proved to be an answer to Benally's long-held dreams. For years, he said, he had wanted to reunite with his fellow soliders from Vietnam but didn't how to track them down.

### Battle of Tam Quan

In her e-mail, VanDan provided contact information for two of the men, Charles Church and Doug Warden. Church had been the company clerk who had typed out the original papers regarding Benally's military award. Those papers apparently were lost in the war. Warden, himself a highly decorated veteran, was in the process of publishing a memoir about his experiences in the 3rd platoon of Charlie company, 1st Battalion (Airborne), 12th Cavalry, 1st Air Cavalry Division.

In his book, "Boy Sergeant/A Young Soldier's Story of Vietnam," published in 2010, Warden includes military newspaper's accounts of Benally's heroic actions in December 1967 at the Battle of Tam Quan.

According to the newspaper

articles, which misspell Benally's name as "Perrie V. Benallie," SP4 Benally and his fellow soldiers were advancing into a fortified village where a patrol had been fired on earlier. The Americans were met with sniper fire, and Benally was hit in his right leg by fragments from an enemy rifle grenade. As Benally continued to advance, the enemy opened up with automatic weapons. A machine gun bullet grazed his right temple, causing his head to bleed and swell. As American forces tried to regroup for a second and third assault, they also tried to rescue Benally who was pinned down in an isolated position, but sniper fire prevented the rescue. As night fell, Benally crawled to a ditch for safety and shot two members of the North Vietnamese Army that he encountered. Later, as he crawled down a trail looking for a place to hide, he encountered another enemy soldier and killed him with a rifle butt to the head. Benally, who bandaged his own head wound, spent the night lying against a wall surrounding a Vietnamese grave and trying to stay clear of enemy fire and shrapnel.

Benally was finally found by American forces the next day — Benally's birthday — but it almost turned out to be the day of his death: Benally's brown

skin and Native American features had him almost mistaken as the enemy.

Warden recalled the incident in his book: "I saw someone up in front of me draw a bead on a figure up against a wall in front of us. I screamed at him, 'Don't shoot! He's one of ours!' I recognized Spec. 4th Class Benally who had been wounded the day before."

Today, Benally emphasizes that he owes his survival to God. "I know that God was looking out for me," he said, adding that he had prayed all night as he lay next to the Vietnamese grave.

### Advocating for Benally

After his rescue, Benally said he spent a number of stints in various hospitals receiving medical care. Since 1967, he said, he's undergone 16 surgeries for his war injuries. When he returned to the Southwest, Benally finished college and earned a master's degree in social work. Before his retirement, he worked as a social worker for the Navajo Nation and also with veterans at the Vet Center in Farmington.

A member of the Disabled American Veterans, the Military Order of the Purple Heart, the Vietnam Veterans of America,

the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Tohatchi Veterans Organization, Benally said he tries to keep busy advocating for veterans, particularly veterans on the Navajo Nation.

But it is his former Army buddies from Vietnam who have been advocating for Benally. After reaching him through VanDan's e-mail, Warden and other Vietnam vets invited him to attend the reunion of the 12th Cavalry Regiment Association in September, an experience that proved to be happy, but highly emotional for Benally.

They've posted a detailed account of Benally's actions at the Battle of Tam Quan, "A Cav Trooper Who Just DID HIS JOB," online ([www.cavhooah.com/info/](http://www.cavhooah.com/info/)), and they've encouraged Benally to apply for the Silver Star that they believe he should have received more than 40 years ago.

The Silver Star is the third-highest military decoration that can be awarded to a member of the Armed Forces, and Benally said he is trying to get the needed documentation to Rep. Ben Ray Lujan and his staff.

He also is trying, he said, to finally get his Army discharge papers to local officials. Once that happens, Benally's name

can finally join the other names of local Vietnam vets engraved on the McKinley County Courthouse Square's Veterans Memorial.