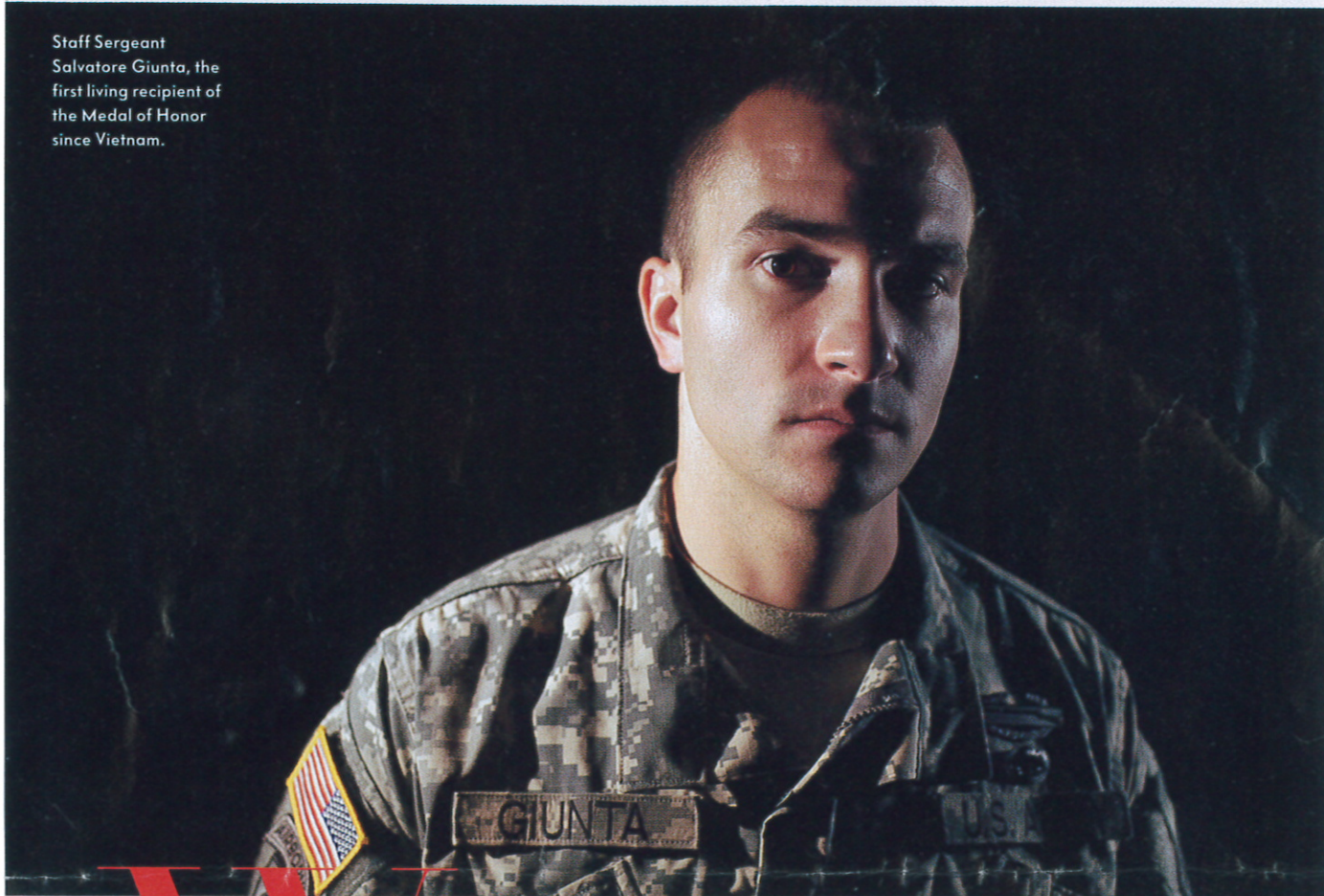


## THE HONOR OF HIS COMPANY

Staff Sergeant  
Salvatore Giunta, the  
first living recipient of  
the Medal of Honor  
since Vietnam.



When Staff Sergeant Salvatore Giunta heard that he was being recommended for the Medal of Honor, his first reaction was anger. He describes it as “a slap in the face.” That’s not what you might expect from the recipient of the U.S. military’s highest honor—and the first living recipient since Vietnam—but Giunta, 25, is deeply troubled by the events for which he is being honored.

On October 25, 2007, taking part in a companywide combat operation named “Rock Avalanche,” then Specialist Giunta set in with First Platoon, Battle Company, of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team, on a rugged mountain ridge in the Korengal Valley of northeastern Afghanistan. Everyone knew the enemy was tenacious—a couple of days earlier, they had overrun U.S. lines manned by Second Platoon and the Scouts, killing Staff Sergeant Larry Rouble and injuring two others. Giunta’s platoon had been near enough to hear the battle but too far away to help. On the 25th, as night fell, they withdrew from their position and walked into a deadly L-shaped ambush. “There were more bullets in the air than stars in the sky” is how Giunta describes the moment he knew they were being attacked at close range. “A wall of bullets at everyone, at the same time,

with one crack and then a million other cracks afterwards.”

Within seconds, the fierce fire had split his team and injured a number of soldiers. Giunta and his fellow paratroopers counterattacked with hand grenades, trying to link up with the men in front. “I didn’t have to think at all, and I didn’t even think about having to think because we were just going,” he recalls. Giunta took a bullet in his body armor, but, realizing that his close friend Sergeant Josh Brennan was unaccounted for, he surged ahead. In a moonlit clearing, he saw silhouettes that turned out to be two of the enemy carrying away Brennan. Giunta shot one man dead, wounded the other, and managed to get Brennan back. As they waited for the medevac, he comforted his friend, who had been hit eight times: “Dude, this time you’re really going to go home. You’re going to be drinking beers and telling your stories to the ladies.” It was not to be, however. Brennan died at a U.S. military base the next day. (Medic Specialist Hugo Mendoza, their platoon-mate, died on the ridge before help could even arrive.)

In recounting that tragic day, Giunta is keen to remind me about his fellow soldiers. “Every single person that I’ve been with deserves to wear it, deserves to . . . They are just as much of me as I am. This isn’t a one-man show.” I ask him about the medal, which President Obama presented to him at the White House on November 16. “It sounds really awesome in theory, but what’s it worth—Brennan? Mendoza?”

—TIM HETHERINGTON