



Written by [Dennis Behreandt](#) on July 20, 2008

The Bravest of the Brave

Bravery. Courage. Gallantry. Intrepidity. Valor. These words have a shared meaning, and they point to the highest aspect of the warrior spirit: heroism.

But what is heroism? In an age when pop culture worships rock stars, athletes, politicians, and entertainment celebrities as heroes, the word is often misunderstood and devalued.

A hero, Mr. Webster tells us, is a mythological or legendary figure, often of divine descent and, in human terms, a hero is an illustrious warrior or a person who shows great courage or bravery.



America has many heroes. Some are folklore figures, such as Pecos Bill and Paul Bunyan. Some are legendary names, such as the American Revolution's Nathan Hale and Molly Pitcher. Some are contemporary, such as 9/11's many police, firefighters, and emergency medical technicians who worked to rescue people in the World Trade Center towers and other disasters around the nation.

But the quintessential American hero is the member of the U.S. armed forces who holds the Medal of Honor. Some are well known, such as Alvin York, Eddie Rickenbacker, Audie Murphy, Jimmy Doolittle, and James Stockdale, but most are not. Regardless of their public visibility, however, they share a common glory. They are the bravest of the brave.

The Medal of Honor is America's highest military award for combat valor. It is presented for "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty" while engaged in an action against an enemy of the United States. It is senior to all other military decorations, both American and foreign. It is awarded by the president on behalf of Congress, but its name is simply Medal of Honor, not Congressional Medal of Honor. The recipient's name is inscribed on the back of the medal.

The story behind every Medal of Honor is told in a Presidential Citation presented to the recipient when the medal is awarded. Many of the recipients' stories can be heard online in their own words through oral history interviews conducted by the Pritzker Military Library in Chicago. Listen to them at www.pritzkermilitarylibrary.org.

The Medal of Honor is said to be awarded or received or earned, and the people to whom it is awarded are awardees, recipients, or holders. The medal is never "won," so don't call such people "winners." Saying someone "won" it, according to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society — whose membership is limited to those who hold the medal — disrespects the award because combat valor is not a contest or an object of competition.

The Medal of Honor has been earned by officers and enlisted men of all branches of service — by infantrymen, sailors, pilots, medics, and even chaplains. The awardees have been 17-year-old volunteers, career soldiers, and military-academy graduates. They have come from every state. In every



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case they made personal sacrifices and exhibited selfless courage to save the lives of others. A statement on Home of the Heroes, a website about the Medal of Honor (www.homeofheroes.com), puts it well:

The Medal of Honor can only be received for heroic acts during time of war, and for this reason many people think of Medal of Honor recipients as heroes for some “Rambo” type of aggressive action. While this may be true in some cases, it is also true that most Medal of Honor recipients received their award not for killing the enemy, but for heroic actions to defend and save the lives of fellow soldiers or civilians.

Our military respects recipients of the medal so highly that by tradition everyone in an American uniform is supposed to salute them first. Even if the recipient is of the lowest rank, a general or an admiral salutes first. However, it is the medal itself which is saluted, not the person wearing it. President Harry Truman, himself a soldier in World War One, said, “I’d rather wear that medal than be President of the United States.”

The History of the Medal

Of the 40 million Americans who have served in our armed forces since the Continental Army was formed in 1775, fewer than 3,500 men and one woman have received the Medal of Honor. It was instituted by Congress in 1861 as a medal for individual valor and signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln. From the beginning of World War II until now, fewer than 900 men have received the medal. Only 103 recipients are still alive.

Sadly, since World War Two, most of the awards — more than 60 percent — have been presented posthumously. For example, 15 sailors earned the Medal of Honor during the Pearl Harbor attack, but only five survived it. For another example, of the 238 men who earned Medals in the Vietnam War, 63 sacrificed their lives by absorbing the blasts of grenades or land mines to protect the men around them.

On March 25, 1863, Pvt. Jacob Parrott was the first of a group of six men awarded the Medal for their actions during “The Great Locomotive Chase” in April 1862. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton presented it. They were the first ever to wear the Medal of Honor. The chase, also known as Andrew’s Raid, was a military raid led by James J. Andrews, a Union spymaster. Volunteers from the Union Army stole an entire Confederate train in an effort to disrupt a vital railroad running from Atlanta, Georgia, to Chattanooga, Tennessee. They were pursued by locomotive and eventually captured; some raiders were executed as spies.

After the Civil War, a flood of medal imitations sprang up, primarily from men motivated by envy and greed. Congress took steps to protect the dignity of the award and the integrity of the list of legitimate recipients. That tended to stop the abuses, but there was another problem. Many legitimate recipients had received their award not for combat valor but for other reasons, such as excellence in supplying troops with matériel or other events demonstrating outstanding performance but outside combat conditions.

Over time, criteria for the award became more stringent. In 1897, regulations were published establishing that the Medal of Honor could be awarded only for “gallantry and intrepidity” above and beyond that of one’s fellow soldiers. Furthermore, submission for the medal had to be made by a person other than the one who performed the heroic deed. In addition, one or more eyewitnesses must testify under oath to the heroic deed, and the recommendation had to be submitted within one year of the



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deed.

In 1916, the War Department established a Medal of Honor review board to consider all previous awards with the intent of undoing decades of abuse. At the time, the medal could be freely copied and sold and legally worn by anyone. Past awards would be rescinded and future ones would be rejected if supporting evidence didn't clearly, convincingly show combat valor above and beyond the call of duty.

The board released its findings in 1917, striking the names of 911 medal recipients from the Medal of Honor Roll. The stricken names included all the medals awarded to the 27th Maine Volunteer Infantry (whose 300-plus members had been awarded the medal for reenlisting), 29 members of President Lincoln's funeral guard, and six civilians whose courage the board did not deny, but who were ruled ineligible for the medal due to their civilian status. Five of the civilians were scouts from the Indian Campaigns, including Buffalo Bill Cody. The sixth was Civil War Assistant Surgeon Mary Walker (see sidebar below).

In 1963, Congress established the current set of guidelines under which the Medal of Honor can be awarded:

1. while engaged in an action against an enemy of the United States;
2. while engaged in military operations involving conflict with an opposing foreign force; or,
3. while serving with friendly forces engaged in armed conflict against an opposing armed force in which the United States is not a belligerent party.

There are extensive criteria for determining eligibility. In general, not more than one medal may be awarded to a person (prior to World War II, 19 persons had double awards); the award must be made within three years of the act justifying the award; a statement setting forth the distinguished service and recommending official recognition of it must be made within two years of the act; and no medal may be awarded to a person whose service after he distinguished himself has not been honorable. Medal holders are given a special pension by Congress (currently \$1,000 per month) for life, which is not taxable.

The Pyramid of Honor

In 1918, Congress acted to make a clear set of rules for awarding the Medal of Honor. The act created what is called the Pyramid of Honor. It recognized, for the first time in American history, there were degrees of service to the nation, each worthy of recognition, but only one of them could be accorded supreme recognition. The solution: a system of awards arranged in an ascending order, like a pyramid, with the Medal of Honor as the final, supreme award.

Thus, Congress created the Distinguished Service Cross, the Distinguished Service Medal, and the Army Silver Star, each of them lower in precedence than the Medal of Honor. (The Silver Star became a formal service-wide decoration, with its own distinctive ribbon, in 1932.)

Over time, other medals were added to the hierarchy of military decorations. Today the complete hierarchy awarded for combat valor and meritorious service consists of 14 or 15 awards — depending on the branch of service — ranging from the Medal of Honor at the top to the Purple Heart at the base.

Congressional Medal of Honor Society

The Congressional Medal of Honor Society of the United States of America was created in 1958 when President Dwight Eisenhower signed legislation sent to him by Congress. The society is headquartered on the hangar deck of the retired World War Two aircraft carrier *USS Yorktown*, moored at Patriot's



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Point in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, across the harbor from Charleston.

The society's small membership — open only to holders of the medal — includes men of all races, social classes, and economic levels. "No amount of money, power or influence can buy one's rite of passage to this exclusive circle, and unlike almost any other organization, this group's members hope that there will be *no more inductees*," the group's website (www.cmohs.org) explains. "Beyond this attitude toward recruitment, about all they have in common is a passionate love for the United States of America and the distinct honor of wearing our Nation's highest award for military valor, The Medal of Honor."

Today, the Congressional Medal of Honor Society tells us, the number of living Medal of Honor recipients is at its lowest point in history. The 103 living recipients — as this magazine goes to press — pose the society a new challenge: struggling to maintain a heritage that is quickly vanishing. Members of the society now meet for an annual reunion and attempt as well to have smaller gatherings from time to time. But each of these men is quick to point out that, since the medal can only be received for wartime heroism, they hope there will be no new members of the society. Thanks to the Medal of Honor Society, however, their names and deeds will never be lost to future generations.

The Medal of Honor

The Medal of Honor is made of bronze in the shape of a five-pointed star; it is suspended from a light blue silk ribbon with 13 white stars on it, and drawn close at the neck. There are three variants of it — for different branches of the military.

On formal or special occasions the medal is worn around the neck, above all other decorations, whether the recipient is in uniform or civilian attire. It is the only military medal that may be thus worn. When in uniform, a service ribbon similar to other military decorations is worn above the left breast pocket in lieu of the medal. When the recipient is no longer in the military, he can still wear the Medal of Honor in public, either the full dress award and suspension band or the rosette.

Medal of Honor Statistics

Since the first award of the Medal of Honor was made there have been 3,467 Medals of Honor awarded. The 3,448 recipients have been White, Black, Hispanic, Asian-American, and Native American (including nine "Unknowns" such as the Tomb of the Unknowns). Separate acts of heroism performed: 3,462.

- Today, there are 103 living recipients of the Medal of Honor.
- Forty percent of the living recipients earned their medals while serving in WWII (28) or Korea (14).
- There are 61 living recipients who performed actions in Vietnam.
- The youngest living recipient is Gordon R. Roberts, age 58.
- The most recent Medal of Honor given was for an action in Iraq. Ross A. McGinnis posthumously received the award in June 2008.

Source: Congressional Medal of Honor Society (www.cmohs.org).



Alvin C. York

World War I, 1918

"After his platoon had suffered heavy casualties and 3 other noncommissioned officers had become casualties, Cpl. York assumed command. Fearlessly leading 7 men, he charged with great daring a machinegun nest which was pouring deadly and incessant fire upon his platoon. In this heroic feat the machinegun nest was taken, together with 4 officers and 128 men and several guns."

Audie L. Murphy

World War II, 1945

"2nd Lt. Murphy commanded Company B, which was attacked by 6 tanks and waves of infantry. 2d Lt. Murphy ordered his men to withdraw to prepared positions in a woods, while he remained forward at his command post and continued to give fire directions to the artillery by telephone. Behind him, to his right, 1 of our tank destroyers received a direct hit and began to burn. Its crew withdrew to the woods. 2d Lt. Murphy continued to direct artillery fire which killed large numbers of the advancing enemy infantry. With the enemy tanks abreast of his position, 2d Lt. Murphy climbed on the burning tank destroyer, which was in danger of blowing up at any moment, and employed its .50 caliber machinegun against the enemy. He was alone and exposed to German fire from 3 sides, but his deadly fire killed dozens of Germans and caused their infantry attack to waver. The enemy tanks, losing infantry support, began to fall back.

"For an hour the Germans tried every available weapon to eliminate 2d Lt. Murphy, but he continued to hold his position and wiped out a squad which was trying to creep up unnoticed on his right flank. Germans reached as close as 10 yards, only to be mowed down by his fire. He received a leg wound, but ignored it and continued the single-handed fight until his ammunition was exhausted. He then made his way to his company, refused medical attention, and organized the company in a counterattack which forced the Germans to withdraw. His directing of artillery fire wiped out many of the enemy; he killed or wounded about 50. 2d Lt. Murphy's indomitable courage and his refusal to give an inch of ground saved his company from possible encirclement and destruction, and enabled it to hold the woods which had been the enemy's objective."

James B. Stockdale

Vietnam, 1969

"For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while senior naval officer in the Prisoner of War camps of North Vietnam. Recognized by his captors as the leader in the Prisoners' of War resistance to interrogation and in their refusal to participate in propaganda exploitation, Rear Adm. Stockdale was singled out for interrogation and attendant torture after he was detected in a covert communications attempt.

"Sensing the start of another purge, and aware that his earlier efforts at self-disfiguration to dissuade



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his captors from exploiting him for propaganda purposes had resulted in cruel and agonizing punishment, Rear Adm. Stockdale resolved to make himself a symbol of resistance regardless of personal sacrifice. He deliberately inflicted a near-mortal wound to his person in order to convince his captors of his willingness to give up his life rather than capitulate. He was subsequently discovered and revived by the North Vietnamese who, convinced of his indomitable spirit, abated in their employment of excessive harassment and torture toward all of the Prisoners of War. By his heroic action, at great peril to himself, he earned the everlasting gratitude of his fellow prisoners and of his country. Rear Adm. Stockdale's valiant leadership and extraordinary courage in a hostile environment sustain and enhance the finest traditions of the U.S. Naval Service."

Michael P. Murphy

Afghanistan, 2005

"For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty as the leader of a special reconnaissance element with Naval Special Warfare Task Unit Afghanistan on 27 and 28 June 2005. While leading a mission to locate a high-level anti-coalition militia leader, Lieutenant Murphy demonstrated extraordinary heroism in the face of grave danger in the vicinity of Asadabad, Konar Province, Afghanistan. On 28 June 2005, operating in an extremely rugged enemy-controlled area, Lieutenant Murphy's team was discovered by anti-coalition militia sympathizers, who revealed their position to Taliban fighters. As a result, between 30 and 40 enemy fighters besieged his four-member team. Demonstrating exceptional resolve, Lieutenant Murphy valiantly led his men in engaging the large enemy force.

"The ensuing fierce firefight resulted in numerous enemy casualties, as well as the wounding of all four members of the team. Ignoring his own wounds and demonstrating exceptional composure, Lieutenant Murphy continued to lead and encourage his men. When the primary communicator fell mortally wounded, Lieutenant Murphy repeatedly attempted to call for assistance for his beleaguered teammates. Realizing the impossibility of communicating in the extreme terrain, and in the face of almost certain death, he fought his way into open terrain to gain a better position to transmit a call. This deliberate, heroic act deprived him of cover, exposing him to direct enemy fire. Finally achieving contact with his headquarters, Lieutenant Murphy maintained his exposed position while he provided his location and requested immediate support for his team. In his final act of bravery, he continued to engage the enemy until he was mortally wounded, gallantly giving his life for his country and for the cause of freedom. By his selfless leadership, courageous actions, and extraordinary devotion to duty, Lieutenant Murphy reflected great credit upon himself and upheld the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service."

Mary Edwards Walker

Civil War, 1864

Mary Edwards Walker was the only woman to win the Medal of Honor. By profession, she was a doctor,



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but she worked as a nurse and an assistant surgeon at the Battles of Bull Run, Chickamauga, and Atlanta. She was captured by the Confederates in 1864 and held until a prisoner exchange about four months later. She received her award for her wartime service, not for valor in combat. Her award was later rescinded, along with hundreds of others, for that reason. President Jimmy Carter reinstated the medal at the behest of a descendent.

John White, the author/editor of 15 books, lives in Cheshire, Connecticut. He is a former naval officer.



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