

Above and Beyond the Call of Duty

Iowa's Medal of Honor Recipients

The Medal of Honor is given for distinguished gallantry during hostile action and is presented by the president of the United States in the name of Congress. Authorized in 1861 by President Lincoln, the Medal of Honor has recognized the valor and sacrifice of more than 100 Iowans (including Civil War officer Francis J. Herron; see article in this issue). Below are the stories of eight Iowans' acts of valor. To learn about all the recipients with Iowa connections, explore the State Historical Society's exciting new multimedia Medal of Honor Web site (www.CulturalAffairs.org) on your own computer or at the new kiosk in the state capitol.

—The Editor



James Jackson

*Captain, 1st U.S. Cavalry, Indian Wars
Born 1833 in New Jersey. Resident
of Dubuque by 1861. Died 1916.*

James Jackson's actions reflect the ferocious nature of the Indian Wars. He risked his life to retrieve the dead body of a compatriot. Although both sides sometimes mutilated bodies, Indians did so because they believed that the soldiers' spirits would then be crippled when they reached the afterlife.

Jackson's cavalry unit was part of the pursuit of Chief Joseph, who led the Nez Percé towards Canada in quest of their freedom. For several years Chief Joseph had resisted a treaty that would forcefully move the Nez Percé from their traditional homeland in Oregon to a reservation in Idaho. In 1877 he decided that fighting the white man was futile and that he would lead 700 of his people to Canada.

On August 20, Chief Joseph's warriors encountered Jackson's unit at Camas Meadow in Idaho. Badly

outnumbered, the soldiers retreated to a defensive position in a grove of aspen. Trumpeter Bernard Brooks, who was near Jackson, was killed instantly. In the face of heavy fire, Jackson dismounted and he and another soldier carried away Brooks's body. They hid it in a clump of bushes so it would not be found by the Nez Percé. Before they returned to base camp, they buried the body.

Seven weeks later, Chief Joseph surrendered, within 40 miles of the Canadian border.

Osborn W. Deignan

*Coxswain, U.S. Navy, Spanish-American War
Born 1877 in Stuart. Died 1916.*

Growing U.S. concern over Spain's harsh suppression of Cuba, coupled with the U.S. desire to annex Cuba and expand military and commercial power, reached a turning point in February 1898 when the USS *Maine* exploded in its visit to Ha-

vana. War followed. A quick U.S. victory in the Spanish possession of the Philippines paved the way for occupation of the islands. Meanwhile, U.S. forces prepared for an expedition into Cuba, particularly Santiago, where most of the Spanish forces were concentrated.

The U.S. Navy's daring plan was to sink a U.S. coal ship in the narrowest point of the channel, thus blocking Santiago Bay, trapping Spain's fleet, and isolating its army in the city. The ship chosen was one with chronic engine problems, the *Merrimac*. The crew would drop anchor on one end of the 5,000-ton *Merrimac*, let the tide swing the ship lengthwise, and then sink it with underwater charges.

Iowan Osborn W. Deignan was among the six who volunteered for the job. He later wrote that he did so because of his mother, who led a hard life. He believed that if he died, the navy would take care of her.

The plan went awry. As the *Merrimac* approached the channel in the night, the Spanish shot out its steering mechanism, making it impossible for Deignan to maneuver the ship into the precise location.

COURTESY WALLY HINGTGEN



Osborn W. Deignan

But the crew persevered through murderous fire and managed to detonate the charges.

Deignan later described the long night of June 2-3: "We all lay on the deck, packed like sardines in a box, with shots flying about our heads, expecting every minute to be killed." About 4 a.m., "our vessel gave a list to starboard. . . . Lieutenant Hobson, when he saw she was sinking, said, 'Very Good! They are helping us out; they are doing it for us.' . . . The water was pouring in over the starboard rail, coming down on us, when we scrambled to our feet and seized the rail to prevent being washed into the hold. The ship then gave a list to port, the water coming over our port rail. . . . We all leaped overboard and swam for the catamaran, which was floating near the ship's side. Just as we started for it the *Merrimac* sank, and the suction drew us down with her under the water."

For hours, the sailors held onto the side of the catamaran, not daring to climb on board and risk being shot. Captured that morning and imprisoned for one month, they were the only U.S. military personnel held prisoner during the war.

In July the Spanish fleet attempted to break through the blockade but was routed and most ships were lost. The actions at Santiago decided the war. By late 1898, Spain agreed to grant independence to Cuba and to cede Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines to the United States.

Calvin Pearl Titus

*Bugler, Co. E., 14th Infantry, U.S. Army,
Boxer Rebellion
Born 1879 in Vinton. Died 1966.*

As 1900 dawned, the United States joined other colonial powers (Great



Calvin Pearl Titus

Britain, Germany, France, Russia, and Japan) in trying to dominate the economy of China and Westernize its culture. The Chinese resented these outside influences, including that of Christian missionaries. Extremist militia groups swore to rid China of foreigners. Loosely translated, the name of the Chinese militias was "Righteous Harmony Fists," from which the term "Boxer" evolved.

In the spring of 1900, the Boxers murdered 200 foreigners and many Chinese Christians. Tens of thousands of Boxers poured into Peking (now Beijing) and Tientsin, looking for more foreigners. Foreign business and diplomatic communities joined with Chinese Christians in barricading themselves and pleading for outside help.

The U.S. minister to China, Edwin Conger of Iowa, and his family were trapped in Peking. Two other Iowans, newlyweds Herbert and Lou Henry Hoover, were trapped in Tientsin. An international force of 14,000 (2,500 were Americans) liberated Tientsin and headed to the walled city of Peking.

As troops approached the city,

the 30-foot wall loomed before them. The international contingents of troops made ready to assault different parts of the wall. In one section, heavy Chinese rifle fire pinned down U.S. and Russian soldiers. Bugler Calvin Titus was among those who reached a corner of the wall shielded from the fire. Colonel A. S. Daggett gazed up and wondered aloud if it was possible to climb the wall. Titus uttered his now-famous reply: "I'll try, sir."

Daggett looked at his five-foot-seven, 120-pound bugler. "Well, if you think you can make it, go ahead and try."

"I took off all my equipment: haversack, canteen, pistol and belt, and hat, and started up," Titus recounted. "I recall that the wall was made of brick of some kind . . . some 18 inches long and 4 inches thick. . . . The mortar had fallen out in places making it possible for me to get finger- and toe-holds in the cracks. About halfway up, a convenient bush grew out of the bricks and that also helped some.

"At last I got to a point where I could look through one of the notches or firing ports at the top of the wall. It was empty. I slid over the top and onto the floor behind. To my surprise I saw no one."

About 250 yards away, Chinese troops were firing at the Americans below, but they had not noticed Titus. He began shooting at the Chinese as more men scaled the wall. After clearing that section of the wall, the U.S. soldiers climbed down the inside toward the gates, where other allied troops were entering.

After the legation was rescued, the siege of Peking lifted, and the Boxer Rebellion quelled, the 14th Infantry was ordered home. "I'll try, sir" became its motto.

Back home in Vinton, Titus enjoyed a hero's welcome. He led the Fourth of July parade in 1901, and

his cousin, Des Moines civic leader Lafayette Young, delivered the keynote. A local merchant printed and sold dime souvenirs: miniature silk American flags with pins of Titus's image. Myrtle Sisler composed "Marching to Peking" in Titus's honor, with sheet music available.

Titus was granted a presidential appointment to West Point, and in 1902, as a first-year plebe, he attended the academy's centennial ceremony. He was shocked to be called front and center of the entire assembly. The commandant and President Theodore Roosevelt walked over to him. Pinning the Medal of Honor on his coat, Roosevelt said, "Now don't let this give you the big head!"

Afterwards, a cadet named Douglas MacArthur approached Titus, looked at his medal, and said, "Mister, that's something!"

Frank Jack Fletcher

*Lieutenant, U.S. Navy, Veracruz, Mexico
Born 1885 in Marshalltown. Died 1973.*

Without firing a shot, Lieutenant Frank Jack Fletcher earned his Medal of Honor during a little-known military action in Veracruz, Mexico. President Woodrow Wilson's diplomatic policies with Mexico in 1913–1914 had deteriorated and he refused to recognize Mexican leader Victoriano Huerta, who had seized power. To undermine Huerta's military, Wilson imposed an arms embargo on Mexico and bolstered U.S. naval presence in the area. When the president learned that a German ship loaded with arms was en route to the gulf port of Veracruz, he ordered Fletcher's uncle, Admiral Frank Friday Fletcher, to occupy the city.

The operation began on April 21, 1914. The U.S. Marines and Navy

took key areas while most of Mexico's military withdrew. But street fighting erupted as the American occupiers battled angry civilians and Mexican troops who remained behind. Armed conflict continued the next day, as more naval battalions and marines came ashore. U.S.

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Frank Jack Fletcher

forces began evacuating endangered American and British civilians. Fletcher was put in charge of a troop ship docked in the harbor. Although the ship was struck some 30 times by enemy fire, he rescued over 350 refugees.

The 29-year-old lieutenant was next in charge of a train evacuating refugees from the interior of Mexico. Although the train traveled under a flag of truce, it was believed that the tracks were mined, and that Mexican guards at the checkpoints were potentially hostile. Nevertheless, Fletcher evacuated hundreds of American and British citizens. In all, he helped over 2,000 civilians escape from the tense war zone. Fletcher received his Medal of Honor for his cool and decisive evacuations of civilians despite great danger.

The U.S. military action concluded in a matter of days, with 126 Mexicans and 19 Americans killed. The occupation lasted until November. It has not been judged a strategic success even though Huerta was eventually ousted by a rival. Relations with Mexico soured and the Veracruz intervention was viewed negatively by the Mexicans for a long time.

Frank Jack Fletcher became an admiral in World War II.

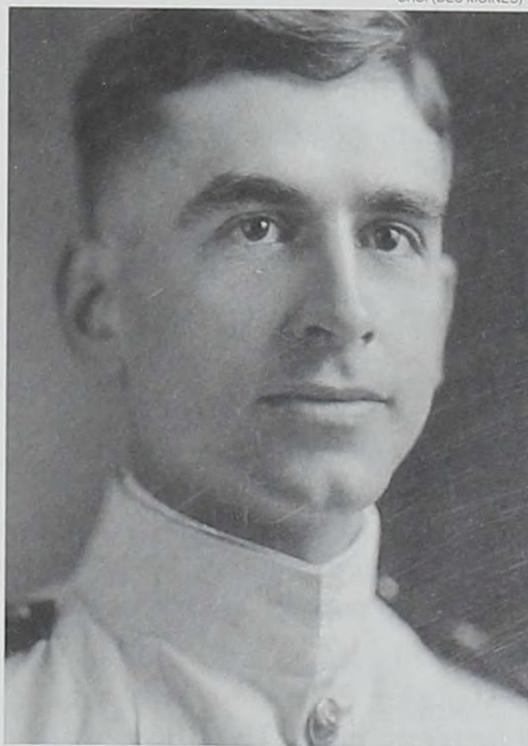
Eduoard Victor Izac

*Lieutenant, U.S. Navy, World War I
Born 1889 in Cresco. Died 1990.*

On a May morning in 1918, Lieutenant Eduoard Victor Izac was eating breakfast aboard the transport ship *USS President Lincoln* when German torpedoes slammed its hull. Before long, survivors sat shivering in lifeboats.

When the German U-90 surfaced, the captain grabbed Izac, the only officer he could find, and took him prisoner. While aboard the sub-

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Eduoard Victor Izac

marine, Izak discovered information about the operations and tactics of the hated U-boat "wolf packs." Believing this intelligence was vital, he vowed to escape.

In one attempt, he jumped out of the window of a speeding train while soldiers fired at him. Recaptured and brutally beaten, he tried again to escape from a prison camp. He broke through barbed wire, drawing enemy fire so that others might also escape in the confusion.

In the next week he fled 120 miles in the mountains of southwestern Germany, surviving on raw vegetables, and then swam down the freezing Rhine toward freedom. Within 30 yards of the Swiss border, an exhausted Izak lost all strength. "So turning over on my back I commended my soul to my God and closed my eyes. Instantly my feet touched the rocks."

In London he was anxious to report what he knew about U-90s, but the war was about over and the U.S. commander showed little interest.

Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin Roosevelt awarded Izak the Medal of Honor on November 11, 1920, the second anniversary of Armistice Day. His friendship with Roosevelt helped Izak launch a career in politics. As a California congressman, he advocated for veterans' rights and benefits.

Ralph G. Neppel

*Sergeant, Co. M, 329th Infantry, 83rd Infantry Division, World War II
Born 1923 in Willey. Died 1987.*

Two days before the start of the Battle of the Bulge, Ralph Neppel, a 21-year-old machine-gun sergeant, swept his squad into the German village of Birgel, on the edge of Hurtgen Forest. They braced for a German counterattack. At dusk an

enemy tank supported by 20 Nazis appeared. From the corner of a building, Neppel held his fire until they were within 100 yards, then raked the soldiers, killing several. The tank pressed forward, and at 30 yards it blasted a high-velocity shell into the Americans, wounding the entire squad.

"There was a tremendous roar. ... A blinding flash," Neppel recalled. "The next thing I know I was laying ten yards behind my gun. My crew was sprawled all over the road."

With one leg severed below the



Ralph G. Neppel

knee and the other in shreds, Neppel dragged himself by his elbows back to his position, remounted his machine gun, and killed the remaining enemy riflemen. Before retreating, the enraged tank commander approached Neppel and took aim at his head, but the helmet deflected the bullet.

When medics arrived, Neppel insisted they help his mates first. Doctors later amputated his other leg.

Neppel attended the Medal of Honor ceremony on August 23,

1945, only a week after V-J Day. Twenty-seven recipients, including Iowan Herschel Briles, gathered in the East Room of the White House. President Harry Truman told them that the Medal of Honor would be a better possession than the U.S. presidency.

After an agonizing rehabilitation, Neppel returned to Iowa and began farming with equipment specially made for him. Later he worked for the Veterans Administration and advocated for disability access and rights. A wing of the veterans hospital in Iowa City was named in his honor in 1989.

Neppel didn't consider himself a hero, stating, "The heroes don't live."

Junior D. Edwards

*Sergeant 1st Class, Co. E, 23rd Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division, U.S. Army, Korean War
Born 1926 in Indianola. Died 1951.*

As the Chinese Communist armies intervened in North Korea in November 1950, United Nations forces withdrew and made a defensive stand at the 38th Parallel. A new enemy offensive began on December 31. Junior Edwards's regiment was assigned to occupy the high ground around Changbong-ni, key terrain dominating the surrounding landscape. If Communist troops captured the hill, an entire South Korean corps would be surrounded, probably captured, and possibly annihilated.

The Medal of Honor citation describes Edwards's action on January 2, 1951: "When his platoon, while assisting in the defense of a strategic hill, was forced out of its position and came under vicious raking fire from an enemy machine gun set up on adjacent high ground, Sfc. Edwards individually charged the hostile emplacement, throwing

COURTESY SALLY AND TOM WOOD



Junior D. Edwards

grenades as he advanced. The enemy withdrew but returned to deliver devastating fire when he had expended his ammunition. Securing a fresh supply of grenades, he again charged the emplacement, neutralized the weapon and killed the crew, but was forced back by hostile small-arms fire. When the enemy emplaced another machinegun and resumed fire, Sfc. Edwards again renewed his supply of grenades, rushed a third time through a vicious hail of fire, silenced this second gun and annihilated its crew. In this third daring assault he was mortally wounded but his indomitable courage and successful action enabled his platoon to regain and hold the vital strongpoint."

Jimmie E. Howard

*Gunnery Sergeant, Co. C.,
1st Reconnaissance Battalion,
1st Marine Division, Vietnam War
Born 1929 in Burlington. Died 1993.*

The U.S. Marines were pushing south of Da Nang. In "search and clear" missions to eliminate Viet

Cong and North Vietnamese troops, helicopters landed reconnaissance teams to evaluate the enemy's positions and call in artillery and air strikes.

Jimmie Howard commanded a reconnaissance team on Hill 488, an observation post. On June 16, 1966, a Viet Cong force of several hundred surrounded Howard's platoon and attacked with arms, automatic weapons, and mortar fire. According to his Medal of Honor citation, Howard "skillfully organized his small but determined force into a tight perimeter defense and calmly moved from position to position to direct his men's fire. Throughout the night, during assault after assault, his courageous example and firm leadership inspired and motivated his men to withstand the unrelenting fury of the hostile fire in the seemingly hopeless situation. . . . When fragments of an exploding enemy grenade wounded him severely and prevented him from moving his legs, he distributed his ammunition to the remaining members of his platoon and proceeded to maintain radio communications

and direct air strikes on the enemy with uncanny accuracy. [The next morning] when evacuation helicopters approached his position, G/Sgt. Howard warned them away and . . . directed devastating small arms fire and air strikes against enemy automatic weapons positions in order to make the land zone as secure as possible. After a harrowing 12 hours, a third of his 18 soldiers were dead."

A marine medic recounted, "When Jimmie and the platoon arrived we were shocked. At least five men were dead and most, if not all the others, were badly wounded. . . . I'll never forget wheeling Jimmie into the shock and resuscitation tent. He was lying on his stomach with his head raised, calling out encouragement to all his men. (Every one of Jimmie's wounds were in his butt.) . . . We razzed him to no end, asking, 'Which way were you headed when the shooting started?' Jimmie took it all in good humor. And as time progressed, we learned how he had managed the defense of that hill all night long without losing more men than he did."

Howard's team received more decorations than any other unit in the Vietnam War. ❖

UNITED STATES ARMY



Jimmie E. Howard

This article is adapted from a Web site about Medal of Honor recipients with Iowa connections. Filled with compelling stories and images, the Web site was compiled by museum curators Bill Johnson and Jack Lufkin (with major research by Dennis Black) and created by State Historical Society of Iowa Webmasters Jill Hermann and Rick Dressler. The Web site is www.CulturalAffairs.org. A multimedia kiosk at the state capitol is another way to access the information.