

THE PALIMPSEST

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Congressional Medal of Honor

The Medal of Honor, first presented in 1863, is the highest military award for bravery that can be given to a member of the armed services of the United States. The award is made by the president, in the name of Congress, to an individual who, while serving in the armed forces, "distinguished himself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty."

Each of the armed services has set up regulations which permit no margin of doubt or error in recommending a person for the medal. The deed must be proven by the incontestable evidence of at least two eyewitnesses; it must be so outstanding that it clearly distinguishes his gallantry; it must involve the risk of his life; and it must be the type of a deed which, if he had not done it, he would not be subject to any justified criticism.

In awarding the Army and Air Force Medals, a recommendation must be made within two years of the date of the deed and the award of the medal

must be made within three years. A recommendation for the Navy Medal must be made within three years and the award made within five years.

Aside from the honor which comes with its receipt, certain privileges accompany the award of the Congressional Medal of Honor. Its recipient, under certain conditions, may obtain free military air transportation; he is eligible for a special pension of \$100 a month starting with the date he applies for it; and sons of recipients are entitled to appointment to the military academies provided they are otherwise qualified.

Once hostilities had started in the Civil War, official Washington quarters began to wonder and to talk about recognizing the heroics and deeds of American soldiers, sailors, and marines who were distinguishing themselves in the fighting. Seeking a precedent for honoring servicemen, it was found that a "Certificate of Merit" had been authorized for soldiers in 1847.

However the only previous precedent for honoring servicemen went back to August 7, 1782, when George Washington created the Purple Heart as a decoration for "singular meritorious action." Records show that three men received the medal in 1783. No other awards were reported.

Little thought had been accorded the armed services during the periods of peace following the Revolutionary War and War of 1812. The Indian Wars waged in the west and the War with Mexi-

co were too far removed to worry east coast residents.

Senator James W. Grimes, of Iowa, noting the trend of conversation, decided to do something about it. As Chairman of the Senate Naval Committee, he introduced a bill creating a Naval medal. It was passed by both houses of Congress and approved by President Abraham Lincoln on December 21, 1861. It established a Medal of Honor for enlisted men of the Navy and Marine Corps "...as shall most distinguish themselves by their gallantry in action and other seamanlike qualities during the present war. . ."

Action on the Army medal was begun two months later when, on February 17, 1862, Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts, introduced a Senate resolution providing for the presentation of "medals of honor" to enlisted men of the Army and Voluntary Forces. With President Lincoln's approval, the resolution became law on July 12, 1862. It was amended on March 3, 1863, when its provisions were extended to include officers as well as enlisted men and made the provisions retroactive to the start of the Civil War.

This legislation stood as the basis on which Army Medals of Honor were awarded until July 9, 1918. It was then superseded by a completely revised statute.

In the beginning, the design of the Army and Navy Medals of Honor was the same, except the

Navy medal was attached to its ribbon by an anchor; the Army medal was attached by means of an American eagle, standing on crossed cannons and cannon balls. In 1904, the Army medal was radically redesigned. The five-pointed star was retained but Minerva, highest symbol of wisdom and righteous war, took over the star's center. The medal was suspended from a blue ribbon carrying 13 stars. The medal could be worn pinned to the left breast or attached to a neck band. The neck band was officially adopted in 1944.

The 1862 Navy medal is still in use today. It is worn suspended from a neck band.

The Air Force used the Army design until 1965. The new medal combines features of both the Army and Navy designs. Suspended by a neck band, the Statue of Liberty is centered in its five-pointed star.

A second Medal of Honor, commonly referred to as the new, was approved by Congress on February 4, 1919. Designed in a cross shape, the medal was to be awarded to persons in Naval service who, while engaged in actual conflict with the enemy "distinguished themselves...without detriment to the mission." The old medal was retained for those in noncombat service. The new medal was made obsolete by an act of Congress approved August 7, 1942.

Interesting tidbits about the Medal of Honor:

The army was the first to present the Medals of

Honor—to the six survivors of “Mitchell’s Raiders” for carrying out a secret mission in April of 1862.

Navy Medals of Honor were first presented on April 3, 1863.

In the Civil War, 864 Medals of Honor were issued to the 27th Maine for defending Washington, D.C., until the outcome of the Battle of Gettysburg had been determined. In 1916-17, an Army Board, reviewing the records of 2,625 Medals of Honor awards, struck 911 names from the Medal of Honor Roll, including the 864 awarded to the 27th.

The only woman to receive the award, Dr. Mary E. Walker, was struck from the Roll at the same time. The Board ruled that she was a contract civilian surgeon.

Buffalo Bill Cody also lost out when the Board ruled that he was serving as a civilian scout.