

# Medal of Honor, A Primer

## What is it?

The Medal of Honor was born during the Civil War as a way of honoring those who distinguished themselves in the line of duty. It was an idea that built on the history of the Purple Heart badge, created by General George Washington during the Revolutionary War to recognize bravery. That badge had gone by the wayside in the intervening years, and Congress once again felt the need to recognize the efforts of the soldiers, sailors and marines fighting the country's current war. Thus, Congress created the Navy Medal of Honor on December 21, 1861, and the Army's Medal of Honor on July 12, 1862. Originally, the Medal of Honor was intended only for enlisted men, but Army officers quickly became eligible in 1863 (Navy officers would wait until 1915 to be eligible).

The first Medals of Honor were presented to Union soldiers of the Andrews' Raiders who had gone on a spy mission into Georgia, hobbling a railway and telegraph lines in the process. The Raid became known as "The Great Locomotive Chase" and by the time the Medals were presented on March 25, 1863, the Raiders' actions were a national sensation. The first Navy Medal of Honor presented (on May 15, 1863) went to Robert Williams of the *U.S.S. Benton*, for distinguished action during the Yazoo River Expedition. John F. Mackie of the *U.S.S. Galena* was the first Marine to receive the Medal, which was presented on July 10, 1863.

By 1917, in the midst of World War I, the Armed Forces realized that having more than one medal for valorous action would be beneficial. In response, Congress codified the Distinguished Service Cross, the Distinguished Service Medal, and the Silver Star in July 1918, with the Medal of Honor remaining at the top of the "pyramid" of valor.

Over the years, the Medal of Honor has undergone several redesigns, ending in the current designs of an inverted star suspended around the neck on a light-blue ribbon with thirteen white stars. The Army and Navy have their own designs, a tradition that started in the Civil War. The Air Force introduced theirs in 1965; prior to that, Army Air Corps and Air Force recipients received the Army's design. Each branch's design features differences within and surrounding the pendulous star, but all three stand for "action above and beyond the call of duty."

As of June 25, 2019, there have been 3,524 Medals of Honor presented but there are only 71 living recipients. These men receive a special monthly pension for life, may fly for free on military aircraft on a space-available basis, qualify for burial at Arlington National Cemetery, and their children may apply to U.S. service academies without a Congressional sponsor.

## Modern Criteria & Process

For an act to be considered for the Medal of Honor, it must be in combat and involve the risk of the service member's life. The act must be so outstanding that it clearly distinguishes gallantry beyond the call of duty and must be the type of deed which, if not done, would not result in any justified criticism.

To ensure each presentation of the Medal of Honor is warranted, every recommendation goes through an exhaustive review process. Incontestable proof is required, including at least two sworn eyewitness statements and after-action reports. A recommendation can consist of hundreds of pages of materials and research, and, nowadays, may include recordings from communications, satellites, and bodycams.

Each recommendation is then ferried through the entire military command structure, from the unit commander all the way to the Service Secretary, the Secretary of Defense, and the President. At each command level, the recommendation is thoroughly reviewed and assessed. If the recommendation meets with approval, the Medal of Honor is presented by the President or an appointed representative.

Today an individual must be recommended for the Medal of Honor within 3 years of their valorous action and the Medal must be presented within 5 years. If it is not, Congress must pass a law waiving the time limits.

## Brief Timeline

- December 9, 1861: Senator James Grimes introduced Congressional legislation for the creation of the Medal of Honor in the Navy.
- December 21, 1861: President Abraham Lincoln signed Grimes' legislation into law, officially creating the Navy Medal of Honor.
- February 17, 1862: Senator Henry Wilson introduced Congressional legislation for the creation of the Medal of Honor in the Army.
- July 12, 1862: President Abraham Lincoln signed Wilson's legislation into law, officially creating the Army Medal of Honor.
- March 25, 1863: The first Medals of Honor are presented to members of the "Andrew's Raiders."
- 1905: President Theodore Roosevelt mandated through Executive Order that the Medal of Honor should always be presented with ceremony by the President or a designated representative.
- 1916: Army & Navy Medal of Honor Roll is created and the first special pension for recipients begins.
- 1916-1917: A board consisting of five Army generals reviewed all Army Medals of Honor awarded to this point to determine if the awards were warranted. The board identified and rescinded the awards of 911 recipients.
- 1918: The U.S. military introduced other valor awards, such as the Distinguished Service Cross, Silver Star, and Purple Heart.
- 1965: The Air Force, which became its own military branch in 1947, introduced their own design for the Medal of Honor.

## Current Designs of the Medal of Honor



Army Design



Navy Design  
(Marine Corps & Coast Guard also receive this design)



Air Force Design