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Medals carry great weight, as do men who wear them

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World War I had Alvin York, who led an attack that killed or captured 164 German troops. In World War II, Audie Murphy became the most decorated U.S. soldier for his exploits against the Germans in France.

Now, as the nation observes Veterans Day, America is witnessing a new generation of combat heroes from the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq.

PHOTOS: [America's 21st-century war heroes](#)

Sgt. Maj. Bradley Kasal is one. Shot seven times during close-quarter combat in Fallujah, Iraq, in 2004, he rolled atop a fellow Marine to shield him from a grenade blast.

Navy corpsman Luis Fonseca Jr., 25, ran through enemy fire in Nasiriyah in 2003 to rescue or treat at least eight wounded Marines.

Army Delta Force Master Sgt. Donald Hollenbaugh, 42, held off insurgents from the rooftop of a building in Fallujah in 2004 until wounded U.S. troops were evacuated. Hollenbaugh retired last year after 20 years of service.

Only one person — Army Sgt. 1st Class Paul Smith — has received the Medal of Honor, the military's highest, since the war on terrorism began in 2001. Smith died at the trigger of a .50-caliber machine gun in April 2003 outside Baghdad. He earned the award for killing dozens of Iraqi soldiers who threatened to overrun his small detachment of engineers.

Twenty-six others — Kasal, Fonseca and Hollenbaugh among them — have earned the nation's second-highest awards for heroism: Navy Crosses for 14 Marines and six sailors; Distinguished Service Crosses for four soldiers; and Air Force Crosses for two airmen.

More awards are in the pipeline. "There are multiple Medals of Honor being reviewed to make their way to the president for his review," says Bill Carr, a deputy undersecretary of Defense. "We're a nation that loves the struggle of men and women being better, being bigger than themselves, being selfless and taking risks on behalf of one another."

During Vietnam, almost 2,000 troops earned the nation's highest awards. For the 38-day battle of Iwo Jima during World War II, 27 Medals of Honor were awarded.

Compared with other American wars, the number of medal recipients in Iraq and Afghanistan is small. That's because the earlier conflicts lasted longer, involved more U.S. troops and featured more intense combat, says retired Marine lieutenant colonel Thomas Richards. He earned a Navy Cross in Vietnam and is a senior official with the Legion of Valor, an association of medal recipients

As with those earlier heroes, the stories of gallantry coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan offer glimpses into the horrors of war. This new generation of decorated troops talks of acting without thinking, except for moments of clarity when death seemed inevitable.

"I thought I'd bleed to death," recalls Kasal, 40, who earned a Navy Cross. "That's why I rolled over (the wounded Marine) to save

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him."

The medal recipients describe the shock of witnessing, and playing a part in, unimaginable violence. Some talk of emotional wounds still raw long after the fighting. Others say the medal itself bears a psychological weight — and carries consequences.

After receiving the Navy Cross, Marine reservist Scott Montoya, 37, says he was slightly embarrassed to see his face plastered on billboards in Orange County, Calif., where he's a sheriff's deputy.

Airman John Chapman, 31, of San Antonio, a combat air controller posthumously awarded the Air Force Cross for action in Afghanistan, had a ship named after him.

A toy company created an action figure in the image of Air Force Cross recipient Jason Cunningham, 26, of Camarillo, Calif. Marine Capt. Brian "Tosh" Chontosh's charge down an enemy trench became a segment in a video game, and he was asked to escort President Bush at a 2004 inaugural ball.

"They went in with the human frailties we all possess," says Wynton Hall, co-author of *Home of the Brave*, a book on contemporary valor, "and they managed to perform somehow in an extraordinary way."

Action born of desperation

Heroics in Iraq and Afghanistan were often desperate acts triggered by something that went wrong — an ambush, a counterattack, unexpected enemy resistance.

On Nov. 14, 2004, Army Col. James Coffman Jr. accompanied 85 Iraqi army commandos to relieve a police station that was under attack in Mosul. He and his Iraqi force were ambushed.

"They had baited a trap for us to roll into," Coffman remembers. As they took defensive positions in a street, waves of insurgents attacked. More than half the Iraqi commandos with Coffman were wounded and 13 were killed before U.S. troops came to rescue them.

"I was ready to rush forward and engage them, hand-to-hand if need be," says Coffman, 52, who was down to four bullets in his rifle when help arrived. "I was determined that my (severed) head was not going to be on TV."

Medal recipients remember these experiences in images frozen in time.

Kasal recalls the sight of a grenade seconds from detonation. Already critically wounded on the floor of the house in Fallujah on Nov. 13, 2004, he tried to strip the gear off the fallen Marine next to him, Alex Nicoll, to locate a wound. That's when Kasal heard something land close by.

"I looked, and there was a grenade sitting right there," he says. "I pushed Nicoll over and rolled on top of him and covered him up. The grenade went off. It rang my doorbell. The blast hit me in the leg, back of the arms, buttocks. The flak jacket took a lot of the blast."

Both men were carried from the building by other Marines, and the structure was destroyed with a satchel charge. After a lengthy convalescence, Kasal now runs a recruiting station. Nicoll's left leg was amputated.

Many of the medal recipients were certain they would die.

Fonseca received a Navy Cross for heroism on March 23, 2003, in the opening days of the war, when a column of Marine tracked vehicles came under intense machine-gun, rocket and mortar fire. Then they were strafed accidentally by a U.S. jet. Through it all, Fonseca was running from one vehicle to the next, treating wounded Marines.

"All this chaos around you, and I told myself real quick, 'I'm not going to make it out of here,'" Fonseca recalls. Seventeen Marines died that day, and Fonseca remembers waiting to be next. "Is it going to be quick? Is it going to be painful? Am I going to feel anything?"

The moment of clarity for Marine Staff Sgt. Anthony Viggiani, 26, came during a frantic search for an enemy machine gun nest while he was exposed to intense fire in Afghanistan on June 3, 2004.

The insurgents firing the machine gun had pinned down five of Viggiani's Marines — his "boys," as he calls them, though they are just a few years his junior. Two were wounded, and Viggiani plunged down a steep hillside searching for that enemy position. Then he saw something: a piece of clothing draped over an arm that barely jutted from an opening in the rocks.

"I'll never forget. It was smoky gray with red piping on it."

Viggiani fired his rifle into the cave and dropped a grenade inside. The blast killed the five insurgents and silenced the machine gun. "I took the heat off my boys," he says.

The lingering images for former Marine Cpl. Marco Martinez put him at the center of a terrifying action movie in which people are trying to kill him, but he kills them first.

"It's kind of surreal to shoot somebody from an arm's length away. You can see what their teeth look like, what their hair looks like. And you look into their eyes and their blood spatters on you," says Martinez, 25, today a college student living in Laguna Niguel, Calif.

He led a squad of Marines in clearing two large residences in Tarmiya, Iraq, filled with Iraqi fighters. The battle ended only after Martinez single-handedly charged an enemy bunker and used a grenade and his rifle to kill the five insurgents inside.

"The grenade blew up. I saw half-bodies flying through the air, arms flying," he says. "I can't emphasize enough how violent and fast the close-quarter battle is."

Hard thing to bear

Most medal recipients question whether they deserved the honor. "I have my definition of a hero and names I put there. And my name doesn't fit," says Hollenbaugh, recipient of the Distinguished Service Cross for his rooftop defense on April 26, 2004.

In a rare gesture, Marine Cpl. Dominic Esquibel declined the Navy Cross he earned on Nov. 25, 2004, as a scout sniper. On that day, he destroyed two enemy machine gun nests and saved two of five Marines who lay wounded in a Fallujah courtyard. Marine Lt. Col. Curtis Hill says Esquibel turned down the award "for personal reasons." Hill declined to elaborate.

Some recipients say the medal can be difficult to bear, either because it begs comparison with heroes of the past, or because it reminds them of a terrible day.

"I didn't wear my medal. I didn't want to wear it," says Marine Sgt. Jeremiah Workman, who received the Navy Cross for fighting his way up a Fallujah stairwell three different times to save fellow Marines or recover their bodies. Three Marines and 47 insurgents died there. "I looked at it (the medal), and all I had was bad memories."

Battling demons, as well

The medals don't shield recipients from the lingering emotional effects of combat. Workman, ultimately diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), had been transferred to Parris Island, S.C., to be a drill instructor when the demons of that day in 2003 caused him to suffer an emotional "meltdown" in the chow hall.

"I was in a world of (trouble). I was heading down fast," he says.

His wife, Jessica, found him toying with a rifle in the garage of her parents' home during a visit there last June. Since then, counseling has eased his stress, she says.

"I'm not going to say I'm out of the ocean yet," he says. "But at least my head's above water."

Jessica Workman says the medal creates its own stress.

"In the long run, I think it caused him a lot more trouble," she says. "Everyone kind of looks up to him, and it's hard when he hasn't even sorted out all his issues yet."

Fonseca says his stress led him to alcohol abuse that grew worse after the Navy Cross was awarded. "I was in denial," he says. "I was looked upon as this doc who did great things out there in Iraq. And so it was hard for me to say that I needed help, that I was having nightmares and dealing with issues I couldn't control."

Fonseca says he was lucky his commanders intervened to see he got counseling and medication. Now Fonseca lectures on the issue of PTSD. He has come to grips with knowing that even a hero, a Navy Cross recipient, can have flaws.

"It was like Superman coming out and saying, 'OK, Kryptonite is my weakness.' PTSD was my weakness," he says.

Montoya, the Marine reservist and sheriff's deputy, earned his Navy Cross for heroism on April 8, 2003, when he rushed into the open on five separate occasions to rescue a civilian and Marines.

In one instance, he hoisted a Marine over his shoulder and ran 200 yards despite enemy fire. "I could feel I was going to get shot," he says. He wasn't.

As a medal recipient, Montoya has visited with veterans groups, and the old warriors embraced him, expressed pride in his heroism and taught him that he was now part of a military legacy.

"I am just learning now to become more proud of my award," Montoya says. "But I also want to make the distinction that it is not mine. I basically hold the Navy Cross in trust for the next generation of Marines that come aboard."

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