

Academy recognizes Medal of Honor recipients

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Of the millions who have served in the United States military over the years, 3,461 exhibited valor uncommon enough to be honored with the nation's highest award, the Medal of Honor.

Today, only 99 survive.

Yesterday, four of them attended a ceremony in Memorial Hall at the Naval Academy honoring the example they have set.

The occasion was the presentation of "Visions of Valor," a collection of bold, black-and-white portraits of the 140 Medal of Honor recipients who survived at the time the project started. Sixteen of the photos were on display in a gallery below Memorial Hall. The remainder will be put on permanent display at the academy once school officials decide where and how to present them.

The exhibit is made possible by TriWest Healthcare Alliance, the Department of Defense health care system for military families and survivors.

"President Abraham Lincoln said, 'A nation that does not remember and honor its heroes is a nation that will not long endure,' " said TriWest President and CEO David J. McIntyre Jr. "Today we are here to help preserve that legacy of heroism ... I can think of no more fitting place for a set of these prints than here at the Naval Academy. These walls are lined with portraits of those who have carried the torch of freedom and liberty without regard to their own personal safety or comfort. It is on their shoulders the rest of us stand."

Two years ago, a set of the 140 portraits was hung in the Pentagon. Soon the chiefs of the various branches requested the collection for each of the military academies. The Naval Academy is the first to receive a set.



Colleen Dugan - The Capital
Congressman Steny Hoyer, left, greets four Congressional Medal of Honor recipients before Monday's ceremony at the Naval Academy. From left are Navy Corpsmen Robert 'Doc' Ingram and Don 'Doc' Ballard, Marine officer Barney Barnum, all from the Vietnam era, and Navy pilot Thomas Hudner, who earned his medal in Korea.

But the ceremony in hallowed Memorial Hall was overshadowed by the presence of the Medal of Honor recipients themselves. Three of the four were short in stature, but their presence loomed over the proceedings.

The design of the baby-blue ribbons around their necks, with the medal hanging taught below, appeared to be meant to bring attention to their faces - the men themselves. The medal was first issued in 1862. Most felt it an honor to be in the room with the heroes. One could hear comments in the audience about goosebumps or lumps in the throat. Academy Superintendent Vice Adm. Jeffrey L. Fowler introduced the four, reading synopses of their award citations:

Donald E. Ballard was a Navy corpsman who tended to wounded men under intense fire in Quang Tri Province in 1968. When a grenade landed near the men he was treating he threw himself on it, but it did not detonate. He threw it away before it exploded and he returned to tending the wounded.

Harvey C. Barnum was a Marine forward artillery observer in Quang Tin Province in 1965 when his unit was pinned down 500 yards from his battalion.

Lt. Barnum found the rifle company commanding officer mortally wounded and the radio operator dead. He immediately took on both roles, rallying the Marines in the midst of heavy fire, and generating a counterattack that allowed a clearing to be established for helicopters to carry out the dead and wounded. Then he continued the fight to meet the objective.

Robert Ingram was a Navy corpsman whose platoon was decimated by an attack in Quang Tri Province in 1966.

He crawled under heavy fire to tend to a wounded Marine. A bullet went through his hand. Bleeding, he crawled across the battlefield gathering ammunition from the dead and tending the wounded. He was hit two more times. But he still answered when men called out, "Corpsman!" While dressing a head wound on another Marine he was shot a fourth time. Still he stayed with the wounded for hours.

Thomas J. Hudner Jr., a 1946 academy graduate, was providing air support during the Battle of Chosin Reservoir - the worst of the Korean War - when one of his squadron was shot down.

He saw the pilot open his hatch and wave to signal that he was alive. He also learned an evacuation helicopter was on its way, so he crash-landed his plane in rough terrain in 2 feet of snow to tend to his fellow pilot, Ensign Jesse R. Brown, the first African-American Navy pilot.

He packed snow around the engine so it would not burst into flames. Once the helicopter arrived he and its pilot tried to free Ensign Brown to no avail. Near death, Ensign Brown told his wing man to tell his wife, Daisy, that he loved her.

Lt. Hudner did just that at the White House ceremony where he received the Medal of Honor. He retired a captain in 1973.

Capt. Hudner was the only recipient to speak at the ceremony.

"It was here, in this hall, July 7, 1943, with 200 others that I took the oath of allegiance," he said. "One of the great honors of my life."

He added it was at the academy that he and others learned the virtues of "service, selflessness, sacrifice, patriotism and courage."

And that is what the portrait collection is meant to do, too - provide a reminder of the example set by the rarest of courageous feats.

Capt. Hudner was given a prolonged standing ovation from those gathered. Among them were midshipmen who will follow his example.

"From their stories, we learn that character is not about who we plan to be, or who we aspire to be, or who we imagine ourselves to be - it is simply who we are in every instant, without a second thought," said U.S. House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, a Democrat from Southern Maryland, representing the Congress, which issues the Medal of Honor.

"We have singled them out from all the men and women who have worn our uniform; and within their whole lifetimes we have singled out for honor just a few hours, or even a few seconds," Mr. Hoyer said. "But we do so because of our faith that the smallest moments tell us something special about character. The action performed without calculating, the sacrifice made without thinking - they tell us what a resume or a record is powerless to say."