



## Sunday marks first Medal of Honor Day

By [Leo Shane III](#), Stars and Stripes  
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View a slideshow of the [Medal of Honor reception](#).

WASHINGTON — Vietnam veteran Gary Littrell doesn't have any events or speeches planned for Sunday, the first national Medal of Honor Day.

He hopes this is the last time it's a relaxing day for him.

"I hope that every 25th of March from this day forward I'm in a school, or at a Boy Scout or Girl Scout event, or a junior ROTC event," said Littrell, a 1973 recipient of the award and president of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society. "I hope I can help educate our youth ... foster patriotism and inspire our youth to become worthy citizens."

Littrell spoke Wednesday at a Capitol Hill reception to celebrate Congress' designation of the new national day of recognition. The medal is the highest military honor.

The event drew 31 Medal of Honor recipients together, including the oldest living honoree: retired sailor John Finn, who manned an anti-aircraft gun in an exposed parking lot during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

"I never dreamed I would be awarded the medal," the 97-year-old veteran said. "I was a little curly-haired boy when I enlisted in the Navy in 1926 ... I could never conceive all of the attention and adulations that all of us medal recipients receive."

Finn said when the attack began he rushed to man the machine gun because he knew every man needed to react quickly. He said he hopes today's troops take that lesson to heart.

Only 112 of the 3,444 medal recipients are living today. Two have been awarded for actions in Iraq, both posthumously: Marine Cpl. Jason Dunham died after diving on a grenade to save his fellow troops, while Army Sgt. 1st Class Paul Ray Smith was killed while protecting his troops as they evacuated wounded soldiers from the battlefield.

"All of us (medal recipients) were just out there trying to do the best we could for our fellow troops on the ground," said Ronald Ray, who as a soldier in Vietnam survived a grenade blast to lead his troops out of an ambush.

"The message is, as long as you protect each other and work to complete your mission, things will turn out right."

Other medal holders echoed that sentiment, noting that their one day of heroism was a reflection of years of military training and preparation.

The first Medals of Honor were awarded 144 years ago Sunday to six Union soldiers who traveled nearly 200 miles into Confederate territory to steal a train in a railway sabotage attempt.