

THE HISTORY OF THE MEDAL OF HONOR

Learn about the history of the Medal of Honor, the United States' highest award for valor in combat.

Illinois State Goals: 1A, 1B, 18B, 18C, 16A, 16D

Grades 6-12

Vocabulary words: valor, combat, consequences, evolved, populace, distinguished, precedent, recognition, substantial, gallantry, insurrection, sought, prestige, clarifying, modification, provision, enlisted, invalid, hereafter, intrepidity



Fig.1: Army Medal of Honor.
*United States Army Center for
Military History*

The Medal of Honor, the United States' highest award for valor in combat, has undergone many changes since it was created. It has gone from being awarded to many to being awarded to an outstanding few. It has changed in appearance, and laws have been passed against sale of the Medal or manufacture of replicas.

Important concepts to consider:

- Why an award like the Medal of Honor was needed
- How the Medal of Honor has evolved over time and the consequences of that evolution

During the Civil War, the U.S. government called upon the American populace to come to the aid of the Union by volunteering for service. Not since the American Revolution had a conflict affected such a large portion of the population. Fathers, sons, husbands, and brothers were drawn in from all levels of society. Some soldiers and seamen distinguished themselves through exemplary service and feats of honor. How were such acts to be recognized?

There was precedent in the United States for military service recognition. During the American Revolution, George Washington introduced a Badge of Military Merit. But this award did not develop into a tradition of recognition; rather it was in use only during the war. A Certificate of Merit was introduced in 1847, during the Mexican-American War, but was not considered very substantial. There was a system in which distinguished men would wear the rank insignia of a higher rank, but it became corrupt.

Finally, in late 1861, during the Civil War, a bill was introduced in Congress and signed by President Abraham Lincoln that created the Medal of Honor for the Navy. It was first proposed by Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, who wanted to promote Navy men's efficiency. The medal was "to be bestowed upon such petty officers, seamen, landsmen, and Marines as shall most distinguish themselves by their gallantry and other seamanlike qualities during the present war." In 1862, a similar bill was proposed and passed by Congress for the Army. The Medal of Honor would be awarded "to such noncommissioned officers and privates as shall most distinguish themselves by their gallantry in action, and other soldier-like qualities, during the present insurrection."

The Medal of Honor became a much-sought military decoration. However, problems arose. For example, there was no standard definition for what qualified as a "distinguished" act. Also, because the Medal of Honor was essentially the only award available, it was given out for a wide range of actions from good service to life-threatening trials. Giving out many Medals of Honor for many reasons meant that the prestige of the award would decline. The fact that soldiers could apply for the medal themselves with no time restrictions further complicated matters. Efforts were therefore made to preserve the award's prestige by clarifying and restricting who could receive it.

One of the earliest modifications was that the Medal of Honor would be presented in a ceremony by the President. In 1916, an Army and Navy Medal of Honor Roll was established for those who had been honorably discharged, were 65 or older, and received the medal for action in conflict, at the risk of their own life, and beyond the call of duty. They were to receive \$10 a month for life. During that same year, Congress passed an act that included a provision that all Medal of Honor recipients up until then be investigated to determine whether they rightfully deserved the award, with the added provision that the recipient must have been an officer or enlisted man involved in conflict with the enemy. A board of investigation was created for that purpose. It found that 911 cases of Medal of Honor awardees were invalid (such as the men who

sat with Lincoln's remains on their way to Illinois). In 1918 Congress passed a bill which changed the wording to "The President is authorized to present, in the name of Congress, a medal of honor only to each person who, while an officer or enlisted man of the Army, shall hereafter, in action involving actual conflict with an enemy, distinguish himself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty." With this, the Medal of Honor was to be an exceptional award given to only a deserving few. By using the word "hereafter," previous Medal of Honor recipients did not need to be reevaluated to fit the new criteria, and the board of investigation was no longer needed. Additionally, new medals were created and a Pyramid of Honor established to award other acts of valor that did not meet the strict criteria of the Medal of Honor. Such medals included the Distinguished Service Cross and Silver Star. In 1956, an Air Force Medal of Honor was created to go along with the newly created branch of the military. Finally, in 1963, an act of Congress made the requirements the same for the Army, Navy, and Air Force Medal of Honor. Most notably, the action for which the medal was being awarded had to have been performed while in combat.

Today, the Medal of Honor can only be received by members of the military for an act performed during combat that is beyond the call of duty and so courageous as to put one's own life at risk. The potential recipient must be nominated and two eyewitnesses must have witnessed the event. Nominations undergo thorough review at each level of command up to the president of the United States. Recipients are then recognized in a ceremony as the president confers the award upon an individual, though there have been instances where a member of the president's cabinet confers the award. They also receive a number of other benefits including, but not limited to, a monthly pension, passage on military aircraft, and burial at Arlington National Cemetery.

Discussion and Analysis 1

The Medal of Honor is the most prestigious award given by the United States military and it has changed a good deal since it was first created. Use the following questions to help consider the changes the Medal has undergone and the effect of those changes.

1. Why did the Medal of Honor first come about?
2. How has the Medal evolved since its inception?
3. What effect have stricter regulations had on the Medal of Honor?
4. What is the Pyramid of Honor?
5. What kind of action warrants the Medal of Honor today?

The year is 1916. The United States maintains its non-interventionist stance as war grips the rest of the world. With war on the mind of the nation, and American participation a strong possibility, Congress passes a national defense act including a provision to investigate the validity of Medal of Honor awards that have been presented since its inception in 1862, with the added criteria that they were an enlisted man or officer engaged in conflict with an enemy.

You are one of five retired Army officers chosen by the Secretary of War to inspect past Medal of Honor recipients. Your job is to ascertain that the recipient's action was distinguished enough to deserve the award. Furthermore you must determine whether the awardees fit the new criteria of being an officer or enlisted Army who performed the action while being in conflict with an enemy. You will then present a recommendation for whether the award should be upheld for the individual or stricken from the Medal of Honor record.

To accomplish this mission you must prepare a report for the board examining the action of a Medal of Honor recipient. Make sure to follow the investigative guidelines.

Guidelines:

- Determine who deserves the Medal of Honor award
 - According to the 1916 guidelines, the recipient must have performed a distinguished act while being an enlisted man or officer. However, it was not until 1918 that a concise definition of a distinguished act suitable for the award was laid out.
 - How would you decide whether an act is distinguished enough to receive the Medal of Honor?
 - What criteria are necessary for the act to be 'distinguished?'
 - What guidelines will you use to make your decision?
 - How do your guidelines compare and contrast with those settled in 1918?
- Examine a recipient
 - How does the action fit into history?
 - Which war? What was the progression of the war at that point in time? What was the unit's task?
 - Focus on the unit's task and how that fit into the broader scheme
 - What did the person do?
 - Describe the action that led the person to receive the Medal of Honor
 - Was the act 'distinguished?'
 - Does the act conform to the guidelines you established earlier?
 - Explain how it does or does not

- What makes this soldier stand out? How were his or her actions different from any other soldier's?
 - Did the soldier really make a sacrifice and put his or herself at risk for the cause?
 - What would have happened if he or she had never done this action?
- Make a recommendation
 - Based on your research, does this person deserve the Medal of Honor or should he or she be stricken from the record?

Alternative: Go over this activity as a class investigating a recipient such as Dr. Mary Walker or William “Buffalo Bill” Cody. These recipients lost their awards during the 1916 purges but later had them reinstated. Using the above guidelines, decide as a class whether they should or should not have been stricken from the Medal of Honor record.

Different symbols denoting gallantry have been worn since ancient times on places such as necklaces, headwear, and tattoos. There was a longstanding European tradition of using medals and ribbons to commemorate heroic acts in the military. The United States emulated this tradition when creating the Medal of Honor, while creating their own design incorporating symbols they found important. The Medal of Honor design itself, however, underwent much change over its lifespan.

This activity examines the characteristics of medal designs, how the Medal has changed in appearance over time, and how this change coincides with history. Review the following activity questions before starting the activity and complete them at the end of the exercise.

*Note: Only the major Medal design changes will be considered

Activity questions:

1. What kinds of symbols are incorporated into the design of the Medal? What do these symbols mean?
2. How does the design reflect the values of the military and the nature of the award?
3. What outside influences and historical and cultural heritages have affected the design of the Medal?
4. How are the Medals differentiated for different branches of the military? Why?
5. How has the design changed over time?
6. Do the new designs reflect different values?
7. What historical events correspond with the changing designs of the Medal of Honor? Consider the history of the Medal itself and of the American nation at large.

Guided Analysis:
The Original
Medal

Examine the Medals of 1862 and answer the following questions

1. How many states were there in the United States when this Medal was designed? How has this been reflected in the design?
2. Why is the Union depicted as a woman?
3. What is a *fascis* and why is the woman holding it?
4. What is attacking the Union? Who would this represent and why is it represented in this way?

Photo # NH 42380 Medal of Honor awarded to Thomad Gehegan, but forfeited, 1862

Fig.2: 1862 Navy medal of Honor.
Naval History and Heritage Command

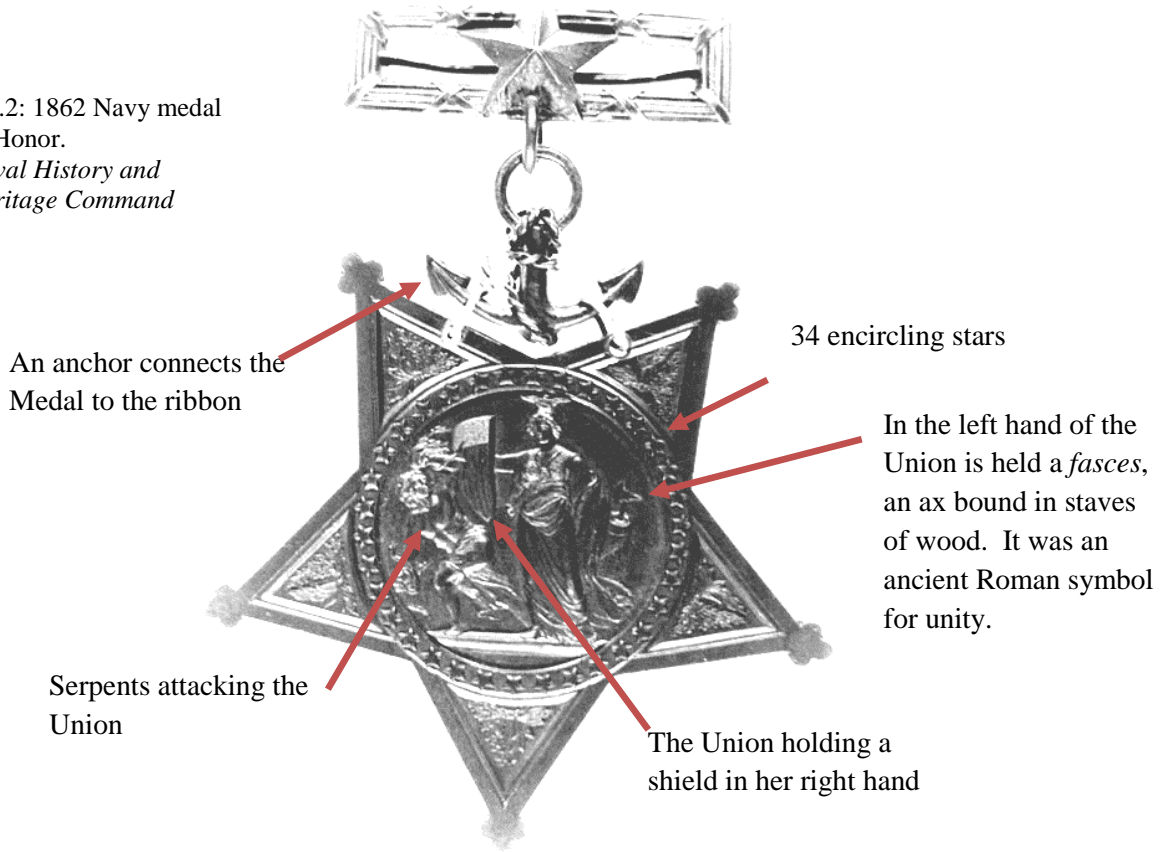
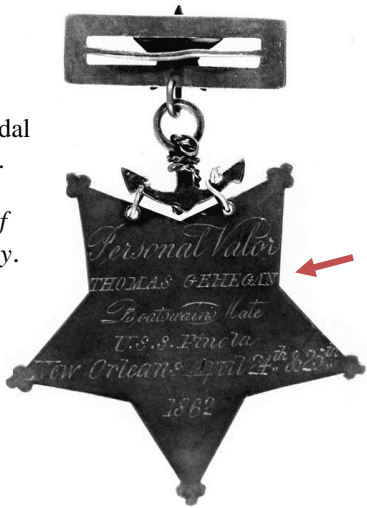


Photo # NH 42381 Medal of Honor awarded to Thomad Gehegan, but forfeited.

Fig.3: 1862 Navy Medal of Honor reverse side.
Naval History and Heritage Command of the United States Navy.



The flag ribbon was used for both the Navy and Army

An eagle connected the Army Medal to the ribbon

The name of the recipient and the date of event.



Fig.4: 1862 Army Medal of Honor.
Institute of Heraldry of the United States Army

Try it yourself:
The 1904 Army Medal

Use the prompt questions to examine the different elements of these Medals and discover the meaning behind the design.

1904

What are the differences between the 1862 and 1904 Army Medal of Honor?

What has stayed the same?



Find the Differences:
Development of the Navy
Medal

Compare the following images of the 1862, 1913, and current Navy Medal of Honor. Indicate the differences and explain the changes. Why did the Army completely change the design but not the Navy?



Fig.6: 1862 Navy Medal of Honor



Fig.7: 1913 Navy Medal of Honor

Current



Fig.8: Current Navy Medal of Honor

Find the Differences:
Differentiation between Military
Branches

Compare the following images of the current Medal of Honor and answer the following questions

1. What are the differences and similarities between the Medals?
2. Are any two Medals more alike than the third?
3. Why might those two medals be more similar?
4. When did the Air Force become a branch of the military? What was it part of before then?
5. Who designed the Air Force Medal?
6. What symbols are used to designate the different branches? Why?

After completing the exercise make sure to go back and answer the activity questions (page 7).

Current



Fig.9: current Navy Medal of Honor.



Fig.10: current Army Medal of Honor.



Fig.11: current Air Force Medal of Honor.

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Images

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