

U. S. Air Force Medals of Honor
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The United States Air Force is the newest branch of the United States military. Since its inception in 1947, the Air Force has had eighteen Medal of Honor recipients.¹ These recipients differ from those in the Army, Marines, Navy and Coast Guard in the scope of their mission and objectives but not in their courage, bravery, and commitment to honor and discipline in fighting.

To understand the significance of the Air Force Medal of Honor recipients, it is essential to understand the importance of the Air Force as a whole and where its specific mission originated. Throughout the twentieth century, the Army had been utilizing the idea of aircraft, from the simple balloon for observation to planes for precision bombing and close air support. Early in World War One, the idea of aircraft expanding and improving the battle-space began.

During the interwar period between the end of World War One and the onset of World War Two, military and civilian philosophers around the world created new ideas on the tactics of war. These interwar tank prophets included John Frederick Charles (J.F.C.) Fuller (1878-1966), Basil Henry (B.H.) Liddell Hart (1895-1970), and, arguably, Adolph Hitler.² The devastation caused by trench warfare in World War One spread worldwide, and philosophers were looking for a way to improve the mobility of maneuver warfare via land or air.

The importance of tank warfare was shown partially in World War One and expanded during the interwar period. Others, however, believed that the true key to unlocking mobility was in aerial warfare. During the interwar period, philosophers like Italian General

Giulio Douhet (1869-1930) advocated for an increase in airpower. He believed that strategic bombing paved the way for eliminating stagnant trench warfare.³ This led to his work *The Command of the Air*, published in 1921, a piece that was considered the first detailed analysis of the offensive and defensive employment of aircraft. In *The Command of the Air* he first presented his “four basic truths” which all revolved around the evolution of warfare and its uses in the future.⁴

Douhet was a contemporary to the man who is largely considered the father of the United States Air Force, United States Army Brigadier General William “Billy” Mitchell (1879-1936). Mitchell served in France toward the end of World War One and commanded all American air combat units. After World War One, he was appointed deputy director of Air Service. Mitchell was so adamant about the use of air power that he was demoted from brigadier general to colonel in 1925 because of his outspoken criticism of the Army’s use, or lack of use, of air power. Later in the same year, he was court-martialed for accusing Army and Navy leaders of “incompetency, criminal negligence, and almost treasonable administration of the National Defense” for investing in battleships instead of carriers to further development of air forces.⁵

Mitchell was able to show in live fire demonstrations on 21 July 1921 that his air forces were effective both on land and at sea. The United States purchased the ex-German World War One battleship *Ostfriesland* and used it for Mitchell’s demonstration. He substantiated his claims that air forces were superior to naval forces (much to the disdain of upper leadership in government and civilian components) when his air forces sank the *Ostfriesland* in twenty-one and a half minutes with aerial bombardment.⁶

It was not until the United States entered World War Two and saw the value of close air support and strategic bombing in breaking

down trench warfare that Mitchell's ideas were condoned by upper leadership in the United States government. It was not until eleven years after his death, on 18 September 1947, that the United States Air Force was formed. Stuart Symington became the first Secretary of the Air Force and General Carl A. Spaatz became the first Chief of Staff. On 14 October 1947, not even a month after the inception of the Air Force, Chuck Yeager conducted his infamous flight that thrust the Bell XS-1 past the speed of sound, an event that ushered the Air Force into the supersonic era.⁷

The Air Force has participated in limited conflicts since its inception due to its different mission from any other branch of the military. The missions of the Army, Marines, or Navy cannot offer the distinctive opportunities that members of the Air Force have, such as aerial supply, logistics, fighting and bombing. The Air Force has produced eighteen Medal of Honor recipients. Of these eighteen, fourteen men from the Vietnam War and four from the Korean War were awarded. Unlike other branches, officers comprised a high percentage of recipients for the Air Force because they make up a large part of the crew of aircraft. Only three out of eighteen recipients have been enlisted members.⁸

The first major conflict in which the fledgling Air Force participated was the Korean War (1950-1953). During this conflict, 131 Medals of Honor were awarded to U.S. servicemen, four of those from the Air Force. Since the Air Force had not yet designed its own version of the Medal, they were awarded the Army version of the Medal of Honor.⁹

Aside from the history of the Air Force, it is also important to understand the background and requirements for the nation's highest military award, the Medal of Honor. Former Air Force Chief of Staff John D. Ryan described the requirements as, "A member of the American Armed Forces can merit the Medal of Honor in only

one manner: by a deed of personal bravery or self-sacrifice, above and beyond the call of duty, while in combat with an enemy of the nation. The gallantry must be certified by two eye-witnesses, and be clearly beyond the call of duty. Moreover, it must involve the risk of life and must be the type of deed that, if not performed, would evoke no criticism of the individual.”¹⁰

The first recipient from the Air Force was Major Louis J. Seville. On 5 August 1950, Seville was commanding the 67th Fighter-Bomber Squadron. On a mission that night he led a flight of F-51 Mustangs against a communist artillery and troop position for a bombing run on the banks of a river near Hamchang, South Korea. One of Seville’s 500-pound bombs stuck during his first pass and would not release. This caused instability in the aircraft and an immediate request for him to break away and return to base. Despite this request, Seville came in for a second pass, firing his machine guns on the enemy position. He then made a third pass, during which his aircraft was mortally damaged. Seville, realizing the extent of the damage, deliberately flew his aircraft into the communist positions. On 24 August 1951, Air Force Chief of Staff General Hoyt S. Vandenberg presented the Medal of Honor to Seville’s widow.¹¹

Captain John S. Walmsley, Jr. showed exemplary courage while utilizing a piece of test equipment, a spotlight mounted on aircraft to target enemy positions. During his tests on 14 September 1951, his aircraft was severely damaged, yet he continued to make additional passes on an enemy train to illuminate the way for other aircraft to attack. He was awarded the Medal of Honor on 12 June 1954.¹²

At the time of his death, Major George A. Davis, Jr. was the leading American ace of the Korean War, with 11 MiG-15 and three Tu-2 bomber kills to his credit. On 10 February 1952, he scored two of those kills against a group of roughly a dozen enemy MiG-15s.

His actions on that day saved a squadron of fighter-bombers attacking targets near the Yalu River. He was awarded the Medal of Honor on 14 May 1952.¹³

Major Charles J. Loring, Jr., in a deliberate and controlled maneuver, dove his severely damaged aircraft into a group of active enemy gun emplacements on 22 November 1952. He was awarded the Medal of Honor on 5 May 1954. All four Air Force Medal of Honor recipients from the Korean War were awarded posthumously. All four were officers.¹⁴

After the Korean War ended in 1953, the next major conflict in which the United States Air Force would see action was the Vietnam War. There have been 248 medals of Honor received for actions during this war. Of these, 156 were presented posthumously. Only fourteen were presented to members of the Air Force. Until 8 December 2000, this number was only twelve. On that date, Airman First Class William H. Pitsenbarger's Air Force Cross was upgraded to a Medal of Honor. In 2010, Chief Master Sergeant Richard L. Etchberger's Air Force Cross was also upgraded after his mission was finally declassified. This brought the number to fourteen for the Air Force.¹⁵

The Air Force finally adopted its own version of the Medal of Honor in 1965. Major Bernard F. Fisher was the first to receive this version, the first Airman in Vietnam to receive the award, and the first living Air Force member to receive the Medal of Honor.¹⁶

On 10 March 1966, Fisher flew in a four-aircraft formation composed of A-1Es, that was part of a bombing run in support of American and South Vietnamese troops pinned down in the A Shau Valley. On their second pass, one of Fisher's wingmen, Captain Hubert King, was hit and forced to land his crumbling plane in the middle of the attacking North Vietnamese. With helicopters more than twenty minutes out and the North Vietnamese closing quickly

on King's position, Fisher landed his aircraft in an attempt to save King. He made a spectacular landing, and King was able to make his way to the aircraft. They both escaped with their lives and Fisher was awarded with not only the Medal of Honor, but his wingman's immense gratitude.¹⁷

During a rescue mission on 1 September 1968, another A-1 pilot, Colonel William A. Jones III, flew extremely low in order to locate a downed F-100 fighter, call-sign Carter 02 Alpha. When initial passes did not reveal the exact location, Jones flew deep into the valley, exposing himself to intense enemy fire. Almost immediately upon locating the downed aircraft, Jones's plane burst into flames around the cockpit. His communications were destroyed, his ejection mechanism did not function properly, his canopy had ejected, and flames were licking his face and hands. Suffering from severe burns to his hands, arms, shoulders, neck, and face, Colonel Jones still piloted his aircraft ninety miles, for over forty minutes of flying time, back to base. He landed the aircraft with help from his wingman and refused medical attention until he could point out exactly where Carter 02 Alpha was located and the position of the surrounding enemy guns.¹⁸

Also presented the Medal of Honor during the Vietnam War were two Forward Air Controllers, Captain Hilliard A. Wilbanks and Captain Steven L. Bennett; two members of the infamous Wild Weasels, Major Merlyn H. Dethlefsen and Major Leo K. Thorsness; two helicopter pilots, Captain Gerald O. Young and First Lieutenant James P. Fleming; and a C-123 pilot Lieutenant Joe Jackson who made a heroic rescue landing in his cargo plane on a check flight, Mother's Day, 1968.¹⁹

The first enlisted man to earn the Air Force Medal of Honor was John L. Levitow, an airman first class, or E-3. This was the third lowest rank possible in the United States Air Force, and his

duties were supposed to be simple and monotonous. Levitow was attached to the 3rd Special Operations Squadron that flew the AC-47 (predecessor to today's AC130 "Spooky" gunships). On 24 February 1969, Levitow stepped in for the normal loadmaster on "Spooky 71." As they took off for their normal mission that night in the Tan Son Nhut Air Base area, the U.S. Army base at Long Binh came under heavy attack. "Spooky 71" was dispatched and fired thousands of rounds at the enemy troops in support of U.S. ground troops.²⁰

The other major mission of the modified C-47's was to drop M-24 magnesium flares out of the open cargo hatch in order to illuminate the battlefield. Levitow was on his 180th combat mission. His responsibility that night was to remove the flares from a safety rack, set the controls and pass them to the gunner who would pull the pin and throw them out of the cargo door. The fuse was set on these flares for twenty seconds before they would ignite. Once ignited, they would burn at over 4,000 degrees Fahrenheit.²¹

During the fifth hour of support, a Viet Cong 82mm mortar shell clipped the right wing of "Spooky 71" and exploded. This blew a two foot in diameter hole in the hull and spread shrapnel throughout the aircraft. Forty pieces of shrapnel hit Levitow in his back and legs. All four other crewmen in the cargo area were wounded as well. The gunner had just pulled the safety pin out of a magnesium flare and was preparing to throw it out when the plane was struck and he was hit with shrapnel, which caused him to drop the flare in the plane's cargo bay.²²

As Levitow was already moving wounded crewmen away from the door he noticed the flare rolling around inside the bay. He knew that if the flare ignited, it would set off the thousands of rounds of ammunition that were still on the aircraft. As Levitow desperately tried to grasp the flare, with the plane in a sharp banked turn, he

realized that he could not just pick it up. He threw himself on the flare to stop it from rolling around. He then dragged it to the cargo door, leaving a trail of blood as he limped, partially paralyzed from the shrapnel in his back, towards the opening. He hurled the flare out of the rear cargo door right as it ignited.²³

Once the plane landed safely at Bien Hoa, the damage to the aircraft became evident. "Spooky 71" had more than 3500 holes in the wings and fuselage, including one more than three feet long. Levitow was sent to Tachikawa, Japan and spent two months recovering from his wounds. He then returned to Vietnam for combat but was grounded on his third mission because his chain-of-command informed him that he had been nominated for the Medal of Honor.²⁴

Two Medals of Honor were awarded to Air Force members who were Prisoners of War (POW) during Vietnam. The first was Major George E. Day, a POW from 26 August 1967 until 14 March 1973. Harshly tortured, Day refused to divulge any information that could harm his fellow prisoners or the airmen who still operated against the enemy. He even managed to escape for twelve days before being recaptured. He held true to the Code of Conduct of military personnel and represented his country with honor as a POW. He was released with his fellow prisoners after five and a half years of captivity.²⁵

Captain Lance P. Sijan was the other POW who received the Medal of Honor for his actions. After being shot down, Sijan ejected and drifted into a heavily forested area. He was knocked unconscious as he landed roughly in the thick trees. On 10 November 1967, Sijan regained consciousness and realized the extent of his injuries. He had suffered a compound fracture of his left leg, a crushed right hand, several head injuries, and several deep lacerations.²⁶

Despite these injuries, Sijan was able to evade capture for forty-five days. Once imprisoned, he held stringently to the Code of Conduct and refused to give any information, other than that required by Article V: "When questioned, should I become a prisoner of war, I am required to give name, rank, service number, and date of birth. I will evade answering further questions to the utmost of my ability. I will make no oral or written statements disloyal to my country and its allies or harmful to their cause."²⁷

He escaped briefly and continued to attempt to escape for the duration of his capture. When his injuries were so bad that he could not support his own body weight, Sijan requested that his cell mates prop him up against his bed so he could exercise his arms in preparation for yet another breakout. Sijan died in captivity in the Hanoi Hilton on 22 January 1968. On 4 March 1976, Sijan became the first, and at that time, the only graduate of the United States Air Force Academy to be awarded the Medal of Honor.²⁸

This rounded out the twelve recipients who were originally awarded the Medal of Honor during the Vietnam War. On 8 December 2000, Airman First Class William H. Pitsenbarger became the second enlisted man to receive the award. On this date, his Air Force Cross was upgraded to the Medal of Honor. Pitsenbarger was assigned to the 38th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron at Bien Hoa Air Base near Saigon. On 11 April 1966, Pitsenbarger and his team were dispatched to extract several Army casualties from a unit near the village of Cam My, a few miles east of Saigon.²⁹

Pitsenbarger was lowered with the hoist to assist in loading casualties. After the first extraction, he chose to stay on the ground with the wounded. During the second attempted extraction, the helicopters came under fire and were hit. Pitsenbarger chose to remain on the ground yet again. He helped hold off the enemy but was killed during the night by Viet Cong snipers. When his body was

recovered the next day, one hand still clutched his rifle and the other his medical aid kit that he had been using to tend the wounded while fighting the enemy. On 22 September 1966, he became the first enlisted man to receive the Air Force Cross posthumously. It was upgraded to the Medal of Honor thirty-four years later.³⁰

The final recipient was Chief Master Sergeant (CMSgt) Richard L. Etchberger. The actions that merited his Medal of Honor were performed on 10 March 1968, but Etchberger's mission was so highly classified, the award could not be considered at the time. While working at a radar site in Laos, the site came under attack. Etchberger selflessly fought off the enemy with his M-16 while trying to save his comrades. Out of the original nineteen Americans at the site, only Etchberger and six others survived when the rescue helicopter arrived. He helped load the wounded onto slings and was the last off the rooftop. As the helicopter was flying away, enemy AK-47 rounds burst through the underside of the helicopter, killing Etchberger.³¹

John Daniels was one of the survivors. He had been shot twice when Etchberger found him and helped him into the litter to be evacuated. At the Medal of Honor ceremony for Etchberger in 2010, Daniels said, "He should have a 55-gallon drum full of medals. I wouldn't be alive without him. Forty-two plus years too goddamn late. It should have happened forty-two plus years ago."³²

Along with their fellow awardees from the Army, Marines, Navy and Coast Guard, these eighteen recipients have become role models for all branches of the American military. Their commitment to the United States, its Code of Conduct, and their fellow airmen showed an exemplary level of dedication that other airmen can only hope to replicate.

During a Medal of Honor presentation ceremony at the White House, President Harry S. Truman said, "I would rather have this

medal than be President of the United States.” The “medals of honor” were created in 1862, when President Abraham Lincoln approved an Act of Congress authorizing them. A single word is etched on each of these medals to tell their meaning. That word is simple, yet defines the character of each of the eighteen United States Air Force recipients discussed above. Even though the Air Force is the youngest of the services, a mere child compared to the other branches, receiving the Medal of Honor merits just as much credit. They wear the Medal of Honor with honor and pride for their country, freedom, and the brothers and sisters who have come before and will come after them. The word etched on the face of every Medal of Honor defines their actions. That word? VALOR.³³

Notes

¹ "United States Air Force Medal of Honor Recipients," Congressional Medal of Honor Society, [http://www.cmohs.org/search-results.php?q=&rank=&organization=U.S. Air Force&division=&company=&conflict=&x=62&y=12](http://www.cmohs.org/search-results.php?q=&rank=&organization=U.S.+Air+Force&division=&company=&conflict=&x=62&y=12) (accessed March 17, 2014).

² Brian Holden Reid, "J.F.C. Fuller: From Practice to Theory" *History Today* 39, no. 6 (June 1989), 44.

³ Michael J. Eula, "Giulio Douhet and Strategic Air Force Operations," *Air University Review*, (September/October 1986), 95.

⁴ John F. Shiner, "Reflections on Douhet: The Classic Approach," *Air University Review*, (January/February, 1986), 94.

⁵ William Mitchell, *William "Billy" Mitchell's Airpower*, Compiled by Johnny R. Jones for the Air University. Air Power Research Institute, Maxwell Air Force Base, 1997, xi-xiv.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁷ "Air Power Comes of Age in World War II," AirForce.Com, <http://www.airforce.com/learn-about/history/part2/> (accessed March 17, 2014).

⁸ "United States Air Force Medal of Honor Recipients," Congressional Medal of Honor Society, [http://www.cmohs.org/search-results.php?q=&rank=&organization=U.S. Air Force&division=&company=&conflict=&x=62&y=12](http://www.cmohs.org/search-results.php?q=&rank=&organization=U.S.+Air+Force&division=&company=&conflict=&x=62&y=12) (accessed March 17, 2014).

⁹ Tom Yblood, "US Air Force Korean War Medal of Honor Recipients," Office of the Air Force Historian, <http://www.nj.gov/military/korea/factsheets/medals.html> (accessed March 17, 2014).

¹⁰ Donald Schneider, "Air Force Heroes in Vietnam," *USAF Southeast Asia Monograph* 8 (1979), <http://www.afhso.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-101004-030.pdf> (accessed March 17, 2014), v.

¹¹ Yblood.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ James H. Willbanks, ed., *America's Heroes: Medal of Honor Recipients from the Civil War to Afghanistan* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2011), 261-63.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Schneider, 3-8.

¹⁸ Ibid., 8-11.

¹⁹ Ibid., 13-51.

²⁰ "Airman 1st Class John L. Levitow," Air Mobility Command Museum, http://amcmuseum.org/history/medal_of_honor/a1c_levitow.php (accessed March 17, 2014).

²¹ Willbanks, 180-82.

²² Ibid., 180-82.

²³ Ibid., 180-82.

²⁴ Ibid., 182.

²⁵ Schneider, 57-59.

²⁶ John L. Frisbee, "Valor: Lance Sijan's Incredible Journey," *Air Force Magazine* 69 (1986), 116. [http://www.airforcemag.com/MagazineArchive/Documents/1986/December 1986/1286valor.pdf](http://www.airforcemag.com/MagazineArchive/Documents/1986/December%201986/1286valor.pdf) (accessed March 17, 2014).

²⁷ Robert K. Ruhl, "The Code of Conduct," AirForce.Mil, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/au-24/ruhl.pdf> (accessed March 17, 2014).

²⁸ Frisbee, 116.

²⁹ Willbanks, 261-62.

³⁰ Ibid., 262-63.

³¹ John T. Correll, "Etchberger, Medal of Honor," *Air Force Magazine*; vol. 93, no. 11. (November 2010), 1.

³² Ibid.

³³ Schneider, v-vii.

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