

The Medal of Honor

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Congress this month designated March 25 each year as National Medal of Honor Day. The day is significant as the day the first Medal of Honor was presented in 1863.

Until these resolutions, there had been no nationally observed day for Medal of Honor recipients and the values they represent for all service members.

Although it has always been awarded for action above and beyond the call of duty, the Medal of Honor has undergone changes in both appearance and function since its creation during the Civil War.

When Abraham Lincoln signed the law authorizing the first medals, in 1862, the award excluded officers and was for enlisted men only, said Carol Cepregi of the [Congressional Medal of Honor Society](#) in Mount Pleasant, S.C.

"In 1863 they passed a new law extending the medal to officers. That was passed before any of the medals were actually awarded," Cepregi said.

Information from the society's Web site discuss points out the medal's appearance has changed over the years.

The [Navy's version](#) of the medal was the first to be struck. It is in the shape of a simple star, and that shape is retained in the medal awarded by the Navy, Marine Corps and U.S. Coast Guard. Its center contains an illustration of the Greek goddess of war, Minerva, repelling a figure known as "discord." The Navy's medal remains essentially unchanged since the Civil War. The Navy changed the way the medal is worn, from pinned to the uniform to draped around the neck, in the early 20th century.

The [Army's medal](#) is a star surrounded by a wreath. It was developed in 1904. The [Air Force version](#) of the Medal of Honor also has a wreath, but instead of the head of Minerva, it bears the head of the statue of liberty in its center. It was adopted in 1965. . Lady liberty has a pointed crown instead of a helmet. And she does stand for liberty although she is derived from the imagery of Semiramis, wife of Nimrod, and Queen of Babylon. Semiramis was famed for her beauty, strength, and wisdom and was said to have built the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon. She purportedly reigned for 42 years after taking control from Nimrod. She is a mythical figure who might be somewhat based upon a historical figure.

Cepregi said there have been other versions of the medal from 1919 to 1942, the Army used a Maltese cross version of the medal, in which the eight points on the cross stand for the eight knightly virtues, and the cross represents the four cardinal directions. This version of the medal was dropped in 1942 because of its unpopularity.

Whatever the service or version, the criteria for receiving the medal have always involved service beyond the call of duty. Until 1940, Cepregi said, that service did not have to include combat.

"The medal was awarded to sailors who jumped overboard to save other sailors. Admiral Richard Byrd received the medal for this polar explorations, and Charles Lindberg received it, too," she said.

She said in early days the Medal of Honor was sometimes awarded to civilians, including famous showman "Buffalo Bill" Cody.

The detailed history of the Medal of Honor included on the society's Web site includes frequent mentions of the 1917 "purge." Many medals were reviewed and rescinded in 1917.

"After the Civil War, a lot of people submitted themselves for the award – they'd write in saying they were entitled to the medal," Cepregi said.

The Army established a board in 1916, under the leadership of Lt. Gen. Nelson Miles, who earned the medal in the Civil War, that reviewed the medals already received and purged those that it felt weren't warranted. The commission eliminated 911 names, included 800-plus medals awarded to the every member 27th Maine Infantry.

Battalion when it agreed to stay past the end of its enlistment to protect Washington D.C. during the Civil War.

The commission also rescinded the medal awarded to Dr. Mary Walker, who had received it for her efforts during the Battle of Bull Run in 1861. The commission denied her the medal not because of her gender, but because she served as a civilian. Her medal was restored in 1977.

The board also rescinded six medals to civilians, including Cody, because of their civilian status.

Since 1863, 3,444 servicemembers have received the nation's highest military honor for courage under fire. There are 112 recipients living today.

Prior to the Iraq war, the most recent recipients of the medal, awarded posthumously, are Master Sgt. Gary Gordon and Sergeant 1st Class Randall Shugart. The two men were Special Operations snipers who volunteered to protect four wounded helicopter crewmembers during operations in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1993. Although both men were killed, they were able to save the helicopter pilot.

The first Medal of Honor presented for action in Iraq was awarded on April 4, 2005 to [Sgt. 1st Class Paul Smith](#) (posthumously), for heroic action at the Baghdad Airport on April 4, 2003.

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