

MEDAL OF HONOR

The Medal of Honor is the highest award for bravery that can be given to any individual in the United States. In judging men for receipt of the medal, each service has established its own regulations. The deed must be proved by incontestable evidence of at least two eyewitnesses; it must be so outstanding that it clearly distinguishes the recipient's gallantry beyond the call of duty from lesser forms of bravery; it must involve the risk of his life; and it must be the type of deed which, if he had not done it, would not subject him to any justified criticism.

The idea for the Medal of Honor was born during the Civil War as men fought gallantly and oftentimes displayed great heroism. George Washington originated the Purple Heart in 1782 to honor brave soldiers, sailors and marines. From that time until the Civil War, Certificates of Merit and a "brevet" system of promotions were used as military awards. The first military decoration formally authorized by the American Government as a badge of valor was the Medal of Honor for enlisted men of the Navy and Marine Corps. It was authorized by Congress, and approved by President Abraham Lincoln on December 21, 1861. The medal for the Army and Voluntary Forces was authorized on July 12, 1862.

The medal is awarded "in the name of the Congress of the United States" and for this reason, it is often called the Congressional Medal of Honor. It is only on rare occasions, however, that Congress awards special Medals of Honor. An Executive Order, signed by President Theodore Roosevelt on September 20, 1905, directed that ceremonies of award "will always be made with formal and impressive ceremonial" and that the recipient "will, when practicable, be ordered to Washington, D.C. and the presentation will be made by the President, as Commander in Chief, or by such representative as the President may designate."

The Navy Medal of Honor is made of bronze, suspended by an anchor from a bright blue ribbon, and is worn about the neck. The ribbon is spangled with a cluster of 13 white stars representing the original States. Each ray of the five pointed star contains sprays of laurel and oak and is tipped with a trefoil. Standing in bas-relief, circled by 34 stars representing the 34 States in 1861, is Minerva who personifies the Union. She holds in her left hand the fasces, an ax bound in staves of wood, which is the ancient Roman symbol of authority. With the shield in her right hand, she repulses the serpents held by the crouching figure of Discord. The reverse of the medal is left blank, allowing for the engraving of the recipient's name and the date and place of his deed.

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