

VFW Honors African-American Medal of Honor Recipients

A total of 39 African-American veterans have earned the Medal of Honor during VFW-qualifying actions, according to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society

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More than 3,500 service members have earned the nation's highest military decoration. But of those, only 92 have been black men, according to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society.

The Medal of Honor (MOH) is an award that dates back to the Civil War. The first African-American service member who earned the prestigious award was Army Sgt. William H. Carney, a man born a slave in 1840 in Norfolk, Va., according to the Department of Defense.

Attached to C Co., 54th Massachusetts Colored Inf. Regt., Carney earned the MOH for his actions on July 18, 1864, during a battle at Fort Wagner on Morris Island, S.C. A battle narrative recalls that his unit's color guard was shot, and Carney took it upon himself to catch the flag and not let it touch the ground. He is believed to have carried the flag throughout the battle without letting it touch the ground, even when he was wounded. Carney was later presented with the Medal of Honor on May 23, 1900.

Delays in presenting African-Americans their earned Medals of Honor have been common throughout American history. In the early 1990s, the Army worked with Shaw University in Raleigh, N.C., to determine if any racial disparity was present during the process of considering Medals of Honor for black troops.

The investigation determined that seven African-American soldiers should have received the Medal of Honor during World War II. Those seven men are 1st Lt. Vernon J. Baker, Staff Sgt. Edward A. Carter Jr., 1st Lt. John R. Fox, Pfc. Willy F. James Jr., Staff Sgt. Ruben Rivers, Maj. Charles L. Thomas and Pvt. George Watson.

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During a ceremony on Jan. 12, 1997, at the White House, all men were awarded the Medal of Honor by President Bill Clinton. Baker was the only living recipient at the time of the ceremony.

As of November 2019, the most recent African-American service member to receive the Medal of Honor was Marine Sgt. Major John L. Canley for his actions during the Battle of Hue in January-February 1968 in the Vietnam War. Canley was presented the award by President Donald Trump during a ceremony on Oct. 17, 2018, at the White House.

Visit [vfw.org/magazine](https://www.vfw.org/magazine) to read an article about Canley in the March 2019 issue of VFW magazine.

Here is a list of the 39 African-American men who have earned the Medal of Honor during VFW-qualifying actions.