



From left, Secretary of the Army John M. McHugh and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel look on as Gen. Raymond T. Odierno and Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond F. Chandler III unveil the plaque honoring the most recent recipients of the Medal of Honor who fought in World War II during the Hall of Heroes induction ceremony Wednesday at the Pentagon. (Photo by Michael L. Lewis)

Newest Medal of Honor Recipients Inducted into Pentagon's Hall of Heroes

By Michael L. Lewis

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One day after President Barack Obama awarded them the nation's highest award for valor, the three most recent living recipients of the Medal of Honor were inducted into the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes on Wednesday along with 21 posthumous recipients.

"Today, we not only recognize the heroism of these 24 brave Americans, we also recognize the significance of the Medal of Honor," said Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel at the ceremony. "The names that grace the walls of the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes belong to Soldiers, sail-

ors, airmen and Marines who represent the essence, the finest, the best of military service — the willingness to sacrifice your life for the lives of those around you."

Hagel was joined by Secretary of the Army John M. McHugh; the chief of staff of the Army, Gen. Raymond T. Odierno; and Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond F. Chandler III in hosting the ceremony at the Pentagon Auditorium, which was filled with the recipients' family members, members of Congress, and Soldiers from ranks high and low.



Hagel congratulates retired Sgt. Santiago Erevia after presenting him with the Medal of Honor flag during the Hall of Heroes induction ceremony. (Photo by Michael L. Lewis)



Hagel congratulates retired Sgt. 1st Class Melvin Morris after presenting him with the Medal of Honor flag. (Photo by Michael L. Lewis)



Hagel presents the Medal of Honor flag to retired Master Sgt. Jose Rodela as Odierno applauds. (Photo by Michael L. Lewis)

McHugh praised the recipients' extraordinary valor, but also did not shy from apologizing for the delay in presenting the medals, which the Army determined should have been awarded, in some cases, nearly 70 years ago.

"As proud and as historic as this day may be, it is, frankly, not without some controversy and some lingering concern," McHugh said. "This effort indeed began ... because there was a belief — we now know justified — that Jewish and Hispanic service members who fought in World War II, Korea and Vietnam may have been unjustly denied the Medal of Honor due to the racial or religious prejudice of those times."

The review also found others who should have been similarly awarded, McHugh said. But he noted that their omissions had little to do with prejudice.

"For reasons that really had nothing to do with our imperfect history, we can only assume they were overlooked and missed instead through the influence of a longstanding and ongoing evil — that of the military bureaucracy," he said.

McHugh praised the countless hours of work that researchers conducted so that the Army can say it has "at last righted all our wrongs."

"I do personally take heart in the Army's ensuing effort and pride in those people who pored over the thousands of pages of decades-old records, who pieced together the narratives and stories that had been faded by time, who were able to identify and at last help us properly recognize the individuals we honor at this moment," McHugh said.

Though the recipients are remarkably diverse, they share a common bond, Odierno said.

"Each of our heroes are different, whether it be their rank; age; unit; campaign; geographic, ethnic or religious diversity," he said. "But they are all bound together as

Soldiers — ordinary men who, under the most chaotic and difficult conditions, displayed extraordinary courage at the risk of their own lives to protect their fellow Soldiers and simply accomplish the mission. It's because of men like them through the generations that I'm so proud to wear this uniform."

Hagel, McHugh, Odierno and Chandler then listened as each citation was read, and presented the three living recipients and family members of the 21 posthumous recipients with a cased Medal of Honor flag, authorized by Congress to be flown by those who've received the award.

"Every one of the stories is awe-inspiring," Odierno said. "Taken together, the actions of these 24 Soldiers are an incredible illustration of the competence, commitment and character resonant in our Soldiers, in our veterans and in our Army."

"We are a nation that stands for liberty and freedom, and we believe that all should be given the opportunity to fulfill their dreams," Odierno continued. "We have taken too long to recognize these men, but they represent the soul and fabric of this great nation, for which they so nobly served." ■

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