

Black History Month – Medal of Honor

In honor of Black History month, I did some research on African-Americans who received the US Medal of Honor during wars of our country.

During the American Civil war, twenty-five earned the medal of honor, all were enlisted men. William Harvey Carney was the first to earn the Medal for action on 18 July 1863 at the Battle of Fort Wagner, SC. His citation included “He grasped the flag, led the way to the parapet and planted the colors thereon. When the troops fell back he brought off the flag., under a fierce fire in which he was twice severely wounded.”

During the Indian Wars, eighteen African Americans earned the Medal of Honor, fourteen were Buffalo Soldiers. The remaining four were scouts recruited from the Black Seminoles, a group of Seminole Indians of African descent. Army Corporal Clinton Greaves citation reads ““While part of a small detachment to persuade a band of renegade Apache Indians to surrender, his group was surrounded. Cpl. Greaves in the center of the savage hand-to-hand fighting, managed to shoot and bash a gap through the swarming Apaches, permitting his companions to break free.”

The Spanish American War saw six soldiers receive the Medal of Honor, five of them from the Buffalo Soldiers including William H Thompkins, US Army Private who ““Voluntarily went ashore in the face of the enemy and aided in the rescue of his wounded comrades; this after several previous attempts at rescue had been frustrated.”

Only two African American soldiers received the Medal of Honor during WWI including Freddie Stowers, US Army Corporal who “Led his squad to destroy a group of enemy soldiers and was leading them to another trench when he was killed.”

World War II no African American awarded were the Medal of Honor during or immediately following the war. However, in the 1990s, the US Army found that systematic racial discrimination has been present in the criteria for awarding medals. On 13 January 1997, President Clinton awarded the Medal to several African American Veterans. Vernon Baker, the only still living soldier received the Medal “for extraordinary heroism in action on 5 and 6 April 1945, near Viareggio, Italy. Then Second Lieutenant Baker demonstrated outstanding courage and leadership in destroying enemy installations, personnel and equipment during his company's attack against a strongly entrenched enemy in mountainous terrain.”

Two African Americans earned the Medal during the Korean War and were the last two to receive the Medal in a segregated military. Cornelius H. Charlton, Sergeant earned his Medal for “Using grenades and machine-gun fire he led his men to fight back a group of enemy soldiers until he was killed.” Although President Truman’s 1948 Executive Order integrated most of the Military, segregated units existed until 1954.

The Vietnam War saw twenty African Americans who earned the Medal including James Anderson, Jr, the first African American Marine to receive the Medal. Anderson “sacrificed his life by smothering a grenade with his body.”