Throughout the history of the Medal of Honor the criteria for its awarding have evolved.  Although the current criteria has not changed since WWII, each of the services has always interpreted it slightly differently and have taken different stances on its award.  For example, the Army has taken a much more proactive look at reviewing MOH awards from long ago conflicts.  Since the end of World War II, over two dozen Medals have been awarded to men who were denied the Medal during the war due to their race, ethnicity, or religion. In 1997, President Bill Clinton presented the Medal to seven African American soldiers who had been awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. Three years later, President Clinton presented 22 Japanese American soldiers with the Medal of Honor. They too had been denied the honor during the war. In 2014, President Barack Obama presented the Medal to the “Valor 24,” soldiers who had been denied based on race or religion. Of those, seven were World War II veterans. One of the latest Medals awarded for action in World War II was to US Army First Lieutenant Garlin Conner, whose Distinguished Service Cross was upgraded to the Medal. His widow, Pauline Conner, accepted the Medal on his behalf from President Donald Trump in 2018.  The most recent MOH was awarded to a retired Army Colonel for actions in Korea in 1953.  No Sailors were among any of the more recent awards of the Medal for actions prior to Iraq and Afghanistan.

At present 472 servicemen were awarded the Medal during WWII. 341 soldiers, 82 Marines, 57 sailors, and one Coast Guardsman.  The Army, the largest of the services, awarded four times the number of Marine Corps and almost six times the number of Navy MOH. This is true despite the intensity of combat that the Army faced during the war.  One proposed measure of intensity of combat compares the total number of soldiers, Marines, and sailors on active duty in 1945 with the total casualty numbers from the war.  For example: dividing the total numbers of casualties (killed and wounded) by the total number of service personnel in 1945 indicates that a soldier had a 10.7% chance of being wounded or killed.  This number for the Marine Corps was 19.5%, roughly twice the Army.

US Navy personnel were awarded 57 MOH during World War II.  Seven of these medals were awarded to Navy Corpsmen who were serving with the Marine Corps.  These awards were initially drafted and processed through their Fleet Marine Force chain of command.  When these awards would have arrived at the Department of the Navy they had been endorsed by every Marine in their chain of command and lastly by the Commander of all Forces in the Pacific, Admiral Nimitz.  Six of the seven were awarded posthumously. With such strong recommendations and endorsements, it is unlikely that Admiral Nimitz or senior leadership at the Department of the Navy would have not approved them.

Of the 50 other Medals of Honor initiated through the US Navy chain of command fifteen (30%) were awarded for service at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, alone! Two of these Medals were awarded to a Rear Admiral and the Captain of the USS Arizona who were killed on the bridge when a 2000 pound bomb detonated deep in the ship causing a massive explosion that also killed the vast majority of the crew in the early moments of the attack.  It is hard to distinguish their actions when they died from the other 1100 sailors who were also at their battle stations when the ship blew up.  How much of a role did their seniority play in their award?  How can you compare their circumstances to the valor and courage displayed by any of the 47 torpedo plane pilots that attacked the Japanese carriers on June 4, 1942? A third Pearl Harbor Medal of Honor was awarded to the Commanding Officer of the USS West Virginia who was mortally wounded on the bridge of his ship and “evidenced apparent concern only in fighting and saving his ship, and strongly protested against being carried from the bridge.”  These three citations are the most sparsely worded of all 57 Navy MOH awards.

Seven MOH were awarded to Commanders of Submarines in the Pacific.  Submarines played a critical role in the Pacific War as they interdicted Japanese shipping, isolated Japan from the resources it needed to successfully wage war and rescued countless aviators who were adrift in the ocean in close proximity to enemy held islands.  It should be pointed out that Admiral Nimitz and his son were also submarine officers.

Considering the ***crucial*** roll Naval Aviation played during World War II in the Pacific Theater, it is surprising that only six MOH were awarded to Navy Aviators.  More corpsmen (seven) serving with Marine infantry units and submarine Commanding Officers (also seven) were awarded the Medal than Navy aviators! 11 of the 82 Marines who received the medal were pilots, nearly twice as many as Navy pilots. In his book “Wings of Gold” Gerald Astor found this particularly difficult to understand since Marines flew 20% less combat sorties than the Navy did during the war.  Astor attributes the proportionally fewer MOH awards to Navy pilots to non-aviation admirals, prejudiced against naval aviation, who refused to approve recommendations for the award. Like the seven awards for Corpsman the 11 Marine aviator awards would have been initiated by Marines and forwarded through the ***Marine Corps chain of command*** until they reached Admiral Nimitz’s desk.

The Navy awarded 4 MOH for the Battle of the Coral Sea, 5 MOH for the First Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, 5 for Iwo Jima, and 3 for Okinawa. It is surprising that no MOH was awarded to a sailor for the Battle of Midway, the most honored battle in US Navy history, despite the countless incredible acts of valor displayed by the US Navy during the battle.

Sadly, politics has been involved in the MOH. For example, on August 12, 1944, Lt Joseph P Kennedy Jr USNR, the son of Joseph Kennedy Senior and the brother of President John F Kennedy, died when his torpex laden B-24 drone aircraft exploded unexpectedly over the North Sea coast near Blythburgh, England. Lt Kennedy and his copilot had removed the safety pins from the explosive package and, well before they were scheduled to bail out of the aircraft, the aircraft exploded. Although they intended to attack the U-boat pens at Heligoland they were still over England and not opposed by enemy forces at the time the aircraft exploded. By September 7, 1944, the Secretary of the Navy was asked to approve the award of the MOH to Lt Kennedy (no award was proposed for his copilot). It was pointed out to Secretary Forrestal that all 55 previously awarded Navy MOH had been awarded for bravery in actual combat, which required being opposed by enemy forces. Lt Kennedy posthumously received the Navy Cross for his actions on September 9, 1944.

It would seem the Army may have had a lower threshold than the Navy for the kind of valor that earned the MOH. Moreover, they have been willing to revisit such awards on the basis of racial, ethnic, or other criteria not known at the time. We have presented information not known to the leadership of the Navy at the time the initial award of the Navy Cross was made.  Maybe these statistics and information could be useful as dialogue with the Navy continues.  The purpose of this document is not to denigrate the service or intentions of any individual but to put into proper perspective certain facts associated with the award of the Medal of Honor to Navy personnel during World War II.

Congress designated the Navy Cross (NC) for acts of valor that did not qualify for the MOH. The NC is currently the second highest award for valor for naval personnel. The Silver Star and the Bronze Star are next in order of precedence. The Distinguished Service Medal (DSM) was created at the same time the NC was created. The DSM was initially senior to the NC but in August 1942 this was changed. The Navy Distinguished Service Medal is bestowed upon members of the Navy or Marine Corps who distinguish themselves by exceptionally meritorious service to the [United States government](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_government) in a duty of great responsibility. To justify this decoration, exceptional performance of duty must be clearly above that normally expected and contributes to the success of a major command or project.

On pages 58-9 of the book “The Admirals” written by Walter Borneman on the four Fleet Admirals. The author discusses the negative press the Navy got over the Sampson/Schley court of inquiry. Here is a quote:

“For Nimitz and his classmates, the case provided plenty of fodder for discussion, and there were supporters of both Sampson and Schley. But the lesson Chester Nimitz seems to have taken from this event was that “washing of the Navy’s dirty linen in public” was deplorable and should be avoided at all costs. When another war presented other choices of heroes and other courts of inquiry, Nimitz may well have remembered this early lesson.”

One has to wonder how many other senior officers also shared this view and would have been reluctant to air the dirty linen of the Hornet’s Air Group Eight on the morning of June 4, 1942, at the expense of recognizing a true warrior and hero in John Waldron and the other pilots of VT-8.  One court of inquiry was already ongoing into the actions or inactions of Admiral Nimitz’s friend Husband Kimmel. One further wonders if the initially inaccurate MOH write up by Captain Mitscher on the pilots of VT8, and Waldron in particular, was the reason Nimitz would not approve of the MOH awards for VT-8