

The Honored Few

A Tribute to the 19 Norwegians Who Earned the U. S. Medal of Honor

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The Medal of Honor recognizes valiant service in the U.S. military—and not just by Americans. Here are the stories of 19 Norwegians who have received the U.S. military's highest honor.

They carried men from burning tanks, saved armored battleships from sinking under fire, rescued drowning seamen and showed courage against the enemy when others ran for safety. During the two centuries of American war efforts, 3,440 men and one woman have been recognized for their courage and their honor while fighting under the stars and stripes. They are the recipients of the United States military's highest award, the Medal of Honor.

Nineteen of them weren't from the United States, however. They were Norwegians.

The Civil War: The First Few

The Civil War wasn't just a battle between the Union and Confederates. It was a battle for a country that many of the Union's soldiers had recently left their homes in Europe to immigrate to. The Medal of Honor was first created to recognize noncommissioned officers and privates who distinguished themselves by their "gallantry in action" during the Civil War. Congress approved the award for the Navy in 1861, and for the Army in 1862. The medal then became a permanent honor when Congress signed it into law in 1863.

According to regulations, it did not matter whether the honored soldiers or seamen were American or not. What mattered was that the individual fought nobly, proved honor and served in the United States military. During the Civil War, 1,522 men received the medal, six of whom were Norwegian.

On March 9, 1862, Norwegian-born Peter Williams stood alone on the bridge of the Union armored ship USS Monitor in the middle of Hampton Roads, Va. His commander, Lieutenant John Worden, had stood with Williams until he was seriously injured and blinded when a shell from the confederate ship CSS Virginia, formerly the USS Merrimack, hit the Monitor's pilothouse.

Williams personally commanded the Monitor through the rest of the battle and positioned the ship between the Virginia and another Union ship, the USS Minnesota. The Minnesota had run aground on a sandbar and could have been an easy target for the Virginia. But, because of his commanding of the Monitor, Williams was able to help save the lives of men on his ship as well as those aboard the Minnesota. After the battle subsided, both the Monitor and the Virginia had been hit by 280-millimeter cannons, but their heavy armor prevented them from sinking.

The battle, thought of as the first battle between two ironclad warships, ended with the Virginia withdrawing and no clear victory on either side. Williams received the Medal of Honor on April 3, 1863.

Twice Honored

Oslo native Louis Williams, born Ludwig Andreas Olsen, is in the minority when it comes to the Medal of Honor recipients. He is one of only 19 men to have ever received the honor twice. No one has ever received more Medals of Honor.

Williams was serving as a Marine captain on the USS Lackawanna off of the coast of Honolulu in 1883 when a fellow seaman, Thomas Moran, fell overboard. Olsen dived into the water and saved Moran from drowning. One year later, Williams was serving off of the coast of Callao, Peru, when he again jumped overboard to save William Cruise after he fell off of the ship. On October 18, 1884, Williams was awarded two Medals of Honor for his brave acts.

The Spanish American War

During the Spanish American War, Norwegians Lauritz Nelson and Anton Olsen participated in one of the most dangerous missions—the cutting of an undersea cable that linked communication between Spain and Cienfuegos, Cuba. On May 11, 1898, Nelson, who was on the USS Nashville, and Olsen, who was on the USS Marblehead, fought side by side to accomplish the mission.

Men from each ship used rowboats to get as close as 30 to 45 feet from land in order to pull up and cut the cable. During the operation, however, Spanish soldiers discovered the rowboats and started firing on them. To protect its men, the Nashville stationed itself in a dangerous area so that the rowboats could safely escape. The cable was cut and the mission was successful. Both Norwegians received the Medal of Honor for their involvement in the dangerous but successful operation.

A Ship by any Other Name . . .

Only one Norwegian has had American warships named after him: Mons Monssen. Originally from Bergen, Monssen was stationed on the battleship USS Missouri in April 1904 when the ship's cannon turret and ammunition storage room exploded as crewmembers were about to load a cannon and hot gases backfired. A number of crewmembers died in the blaze. But Monssen single-handedly fought the fire in the storage room by throwing water on it until the firemen could get him a firehose.

During World War II, the destroyer USS Monssen, which fought in the battle of Midway and was sunk in 1942 by the Japanese in the battle of Guadalcanal, was named after the Norwegian medal recipient. In 1944, another ship bore Monssen's name, a destroyer that served in operations in the Korean War and in the Pacific until 1963.

World War I: The Last Two

On October 9, 1918, Berger Holton Loman was fighting in France during World War I when German troops only 300 feet away started shooting machine guns at Loman's battalion. The company dove for cover. Loman, however, took action instead of taking shelter. He crawled toward the Germans by himself while under fire, and managed to independently kill or capture all of the German gun crew and turn the machine gun against the Germans that ran away. For his brave actions he received the Medal of Honor.

The first World War was the last war in which a Norwegian received the U.S. Medal of Honor. Approximately 124 men received the honor during that war, two of whom were Norwegians. One of those men, Reidar Waaler, was the last surviving Norwegian recipient of the Medal of

Honor. He died in 1979.

SIDEBAR: Norwegian Recipients of the U.S. Medal of Honor

1. **Robert Brown**, born 1830, captain of the USS Richmond during the Civil War.
2. **William Phinney**, born 1824, served on the USS Lackawanna during the attack on Fort Morgan during the Civil War.
3. **Henry Johnson**, born 1824, private crewman on the USS Metacomet in the battle of Mobile Bay during the Civil War.
4. **John Johnson**, born 1842, served as a private in a field artillery company and fought in battles at Bull Run, South Mountain, Gainesville, Antietam and Fredricksburg during the Civil War.
5. **Augustus Williams**, born 1842, served on USS Santiago de Cuba and fought in the battle at Fort Fisher during the Civil War.
6. **Peter Williams**, born 1831, sailor on USS Monitor and fought during the battle with the CSS Virginia, formerly the USS Merrimack, during the Civil War.
7. **Thomas Robinson**, born 1837, served as captain in the marines and saved a landsman from drowning off New Orleans.
8. **Louis Williams**, born 1845, served as a Marine captain in the 1880s and is one of only 19 people to receive the Medal of Honor twice.
9. **Lauritz Nelson**, born 1860, served on USS Nashville during the Spanish American War.
10. **Anton Olsen**, born 1867, served on USS Marblehead during the Spanish American War.
11. **Hans Johnsen**, born 1865, served as chief machinist on the torpedo boat Winslow during the Spanish American War.
12. **Thomas Sletteland**, born 1872, was the first Medal of Honor recipient from North Dakota. He served as a private soldier in North Dakota's first infantry regiment and fought in the Philippines.
13. **Andrew V. Stoltenberg** served on USS Pamanga and fought at Samar in the Philippine Islands.
14. **Martin Torinus Torgerson**, born 1875, served with the Marines in the Chinese Boxer Rebellion.
15. **Johannes J. Johannessen**, born 1872, served with the Navy on USS Iowa off of the coast of Japan.
16. **Mons Monssen**, born 1867, served as a first sergeant of cannon batteries on USS Missouri in 1904 and has since had two battleships named after him.
17. **Karl Westa**, born 1875, served as a machinist on USS North Dakota in 1910.
18. **Berger Holton Loman**, born 1886, fought in France during World War I.
19. **Reidar Waaler**, born 1894, fought in France during World War I and was the last surviving Norwegian recipient of the medal.

BOXOUT: What is the Medal of Honor?

The Medal of Honor, sometimes called the Congressional Medal of Honor, is given to individuals who distinguish themselves by valor and bravery in action in the service of the U.S. military. More than 3,400 Medals of Honor have been awarded since the first medal was given out in 1863.

Alabama-based writer Lydia Seabol grew up visiting Civil War battle sites and has long had an appreciation for war history.