



Medal of Honor recipient Jay Vargas shares a laugh with quilter Polly Gillespie after the Congressional Medal of Honor Society convention luncheon Thursday at the Knoxville Convention Center. The Smoky Mountain chapter of the Quilts of Valor Foundation made special quilts for every living Medal of Honor recipient. Vargas received the nation's highest military decoration for action in Lai Do, Vietnam, in 1968.

National 'treasures' fill hall

Heroes praise Knoxville reception



Medal of Honor recipient Roger Doston greets Capt. Brian Lennon, left, and 1st Sgt. Les Morrison of the Tennessee National Guard's 230th Air Cavalry on Thursday at the Convention Center. Doston received the nation's highest military decoration while serving as the commander of a Special Forces detachment in Vietnam.

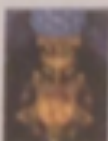
By Les Neuhaus
 Special to the News Sentinel

More than 500 veterans, current service members and members of their families packed the main ballroom at the Knoxville Convention Center on Thursday to celebrate the stories of the roughly 50 Medal of Honor recipients in town for the convention celebrating their selfless actions.

The luncheon, which was emceed by convention co-chairman and retired Air Force veteran Christopher Coyne, was held as a salute to the recipients of the nation's highest military

decoration, one day after the long-awaited convention kicked off. They entered the grand room while passing through a phalanx of ROTC cadets, swords drawn and raised above the recipients' heads as they passed under and through, toward the tables.

Also honored during the event was Eddie Mannix, owner of Pro-Tige Cleaners, who has donated countless resources to the Knoxville Honor Air Flights. Those flights have honored thousands of World War



MEDAL OF HONOR

II and Korean War-era veterans

See MEDAL, 20A

He earned his medal in France in 1944, landing off Nazis as close as 10 yards away.

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Gary George Wetzell, a recipient from the Vietnam War who worked as a helicopter door gunner who lost much of his left arm in the same battle that earned him the decoration, said the hospitality Knoxvilleans have shown has also been great.

"So many people have offered for us to stay with them, so I'm taking a lot of addresses down and you better bet I'll be back after the convention," Wetzell, 66, said. "Here it is, more than four decades after I was given this honor, and it's still a privilege every time I put it on."

■ Town Hall Forum, 10:30 a.m. today, Cox Auditorium, University of Tennessee, and New Hope Center, 442 National Security Complex, Oak Ridge. Medal recipients are interviewed and answer audience questions. Public welcome, seating limited.

■ Autograph session, 2-4 p.m. today, lobby in downtown Knoxville

■ Patriot Award Gala, 6:30-10 p.m. Saturday, Knoxville Convention Center. Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito Jr., golf commentator David Feherty, CNN's Jake Tapper and actor Mark Wahlberg will be recognized for their commitments to the military.

More information: www.mohknoxville.com

knoxnews.com

Video: Medal of Honor recipients march into Knoxville Convention Center ballroom; handmade quilts given to recipients.

MEDAL
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have been able to fly on all-expense paid trips to Washington, D.C., to visit memorial sites dedicated to servicemen from their generations.

The keynote speaker was Maj. Gen. Terry M. Hinton, the adjunct general of the Tennessee National Guard.

"Trying to coordinate an event like this is like trying to herd cats onto the back of a fatbed truck — and I say that knowing the committee has done a great job pulling this together," Hinton said.



MEDAL OF HONOR

"These men are the greatest treasures that this country has. Every breath that we take is a direct reflection on their actions. As a military child and grandchild, my dad did 44 years in the National Guard. ... I had a reasonable knowledge

understanding the prestige surrounding the Medal of Honor. If you were a kid growing up back then, you knew who Sgt. Alvin York was, and you knew it wasn't Gary Cooper."

Following the event, which included servings of grits and Moon Pie, more than 50 quilts hung around the convention center — each one devoted to a specific Medal of Honor recipient — on display for everyone to see. The recipients went to the quilts designated for them, marveling at the labor put into each one.

Sammy L. Davis, a heralded Vietnam veteran Medal of Honor recipient and the real "Forrest Gump," was on hand to look over the quilt made for him and his wife. They inspected each side, mentioning how impressed they were with the stitching, and posed for pictures with the team of six women who made the padded covering.

"Think about the hours they put into this quilt," Davis, 67, said. "It's awesome, just like the people of Knoxville, who have made me feel like family. The people here are extremely patriotic and love America; that much is clear."

Another recipient, Robert D. Maxwell, one of the few World War II recipients at the Knoxville convention, stood next to his quilt as media competed for his attention. He earned his medal in France in 1944, fending off Nazis as close as 10 yards away.

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The Charlie Daniels Band performs for Medal of Honor recipients, their families and guests during a concert at the Tennessee Theatre on Thursday.



Honor Air Knoxville founder Eddie Mannis acknowledges receiving the Generations of Service Award during the Congressional Medal of Honor Society convention luncheon Thursday at Knoxville Convention Center. At left is convention co-chair Chris Coyle.



Medal of Honor recipient Ryan Pitts of Washou, W.M., accepts for the Congressional Medal of Honor Society convention luncheon Thursday. Pitts received the decoration while serving with the 17th Airborne Brigade in Kunar Province, Afghanistan.

By Mike ...

MEDAL OF HONOR CONVENTION

When: Today-Saturday

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