

Thomas J. Hudner Jr., 93, war hero and veterans' affairs commissioner



JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF/FILE 2012

A native of Fall River, Thomas J. Hudner Jr. received the Medal of Honor in 1951 for his efforts to save a fellow pilot during the Korean War.

By Joseph P. Kahn

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One was the son of a Mississippi sharecropper, the other a privileged New England prep school graduate. One died young, a casualty of wartime. The other lived a long life celebrated for its service to country and to championing racial equality.

Navy Ensign Jesse L. Brown and Lieutenant Thomas J. Hudner Jr., who died Monday at age 93, will forever be linked in history by who they were and what they did. On Dec. 4, 1950, the two pilots were near North Korea's Chosin Reservoir when Brown's plane was shot down, crash-landing on a snow-packed mountainside. Spotting Brown waving from the cockpit, Mr. Hudner ditched his own plane near Brown's and attempted to free his friend from the smoking wreckage. He could not and was evacuated by helicopter as darkness descended.

"We'll be back for you," he told a dying Brown, who had a wife and 2-year-old daughter back home.

Navy officers, however, believed a return trip to the crash site would be futile and rejected the mission.

In 2013, Mr. Hudner returned to North Korea in hopes of retrieving the remains of Brown. Although he failed to, his wartime heroics had long ago become the stuff of legend.

As a profile in courage, his rescue attempt was stirring enough, earning him worldwide publicity and a Medal of Honor. As a lesson in brotherhood, coming just two years after the US military had been desegregated, it resonated much deeper. Until then, many Americans had doubted whether a white soldier would risk his life to save a black soldier's. A brave young Navy flier had proved them wrong.

"Not a day goes by that I don't think of that day, and Jesse," Mr. Hudner reflected decades later, flanked by Brown's widow, Daisy Brown Thorne, during a ship-christening ceremony in 1973.

A relative confirmed the death of Mr. Hudner, a career Navy officer and former commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Veterans' Services.

"Few possess the bravery, determination, and character that Captain Hudner displayed throughout his lifetime," Governor Charlie Baker said in a statement. "The memory of

Massachusetts can be proud that a hero such as Captain Hudner called the Commonwealth home.”

“Hudner was a hero in the true meaning of the word,” Navy Secretary Richard V. Spencer wrote.

Mr. Hudner lived long enough to see his words and deeds honored many times over. Along with Brown and others who served alongside him, he was the subject of a 2015 book by Adam Makos, titled “Devotion: An Epic Story of Heroism, Friendship, and Sacrifice.” That same year, Mr. Hudner was saluted at Maine’s Bath Iron Works during a keel-laying on a Navy guided missile destroyer that bears his name. It was christened in April.

True to his spirit, Mr. Hudner tried to persuade authorities to name the ship after Brown, not himself. In 1973, the Navy had christened one of its frigates the USS Jesse L. Brown. It had been decommissioned 22 years later, however, and sold to the Egyptian government, which changed its name.

Mr. Hudner’s loyalty to his fallen wingmate never wavered and neither did his resolve to keep Brown’s memory alive. He paid for Daisy Brown’s postwar college education and remained close to her and her daughter throughout Daisy’s life (she died in 2014).

Fletcher Brown expressed awe in April — nearly 67 years after his brother’s death — when he recalled Mr. Hudner’s audacious feat.

“For him to have crash-landed his plane deliberately, that took a lot of guts and a lot of determination,” said Brown, 85, of Los Angeles. “Tom is a very close friend.”

In a 2015 letter to Navy Secretary Ray Mabus, Mr. Hudner explained — once again — why he felt Brown deserved to have his name on an operational ship. “As our nation once again struggles with racial division,” Mr. Hudner wrote, “we could send a strong message by remembering Jesse in this manner. It would show that in our Navy, men and women of all colors are accepted as equal . . . [and] ensure that Jesse’s legacy lives on, long after we, his friends, have left this earth.”

Thomas Jerome Hudner Jr. was born on Aug. 31, 1924. The oldest of four brothers, he grew up in Fall River, where his father, Thomas, owned a chain of grocery stores. In 1939, young Tom (nicknamed Lou) entered Phillips Academy in Andover, where he excelled as an athlete and student.

After war broke out, Mr. Hudner enrolled in the Naval Academy. He graduated in 1946 — his Annapolis schoolmates included Jimmy Carter — and worked in naval communications before undertaking flight training. He qualified as an aviator in 1949 and was assigned to Fighter Squadron 32, where he and Brown flew single-propeller Corsairs off the aircraft carrier USS Leyte, part of the Seventh Fleet's Task Force 77 supporting US ground troops.

By then, Brown was already becoming a celebrated member of America's combat forces. As the Navy's first black pilot, he was the subject of a Life magazine feature scheduled to appear in late 1950. Owing to his death, it never did.

Mr. Hudner initially believed his own actions might be punished, not celebrated, and blamed himself for not having done more to save his friend. Aboard the Leyte, his commanding officer had explicitly warned pilots against taking such risks. Yet that edict "was based on the concept of a nameless, faceless downed pilot," Makos wrote. "But when that pilot was Jesse, everything changed."

Captain T.U. Sisson, the Leyte commander, chose not to subject Mr. Hudner to a court-martial, summarizing his feat this way: "There's been no finer act of unselfish heroism in military history."

At the White House on April 13, 1951, President Harry Truman awarded Mr. Hudner the Medal of Honor for "exceptionally valiant action and selfless devotion to a shipmate [that] sustain and enhance the highest traditions of the US Naval Service." Mr. Hudner was the Navy's first Medal of Honor recipient since World War II.

"My family were rabid Republicans," he noted with a smile, "but they were charmed by the president, who claimed he'd rather have the medal than be president."

Mr. Hudner went on to serve as a naval flight instructor, test pilot, training squadron

War, he briefly served as executive officer aboard the USS Kitty Hawk, an aircraft carrier.

After retiring from the Navy in 1973 with the rank of captain, Mr. Hudner worked as a management consultant. From 1991 to 1993 he oversaw the state's Department of Veterans' Services. He also served as president of the regional USO and as Medal of Honor Society treasurer.

In 1968, he married Georgea Smith, a widow with three children. In addition to his wife, of Concord, Mr. Hudner leaves a son, Thomas III of Concord, two stepdaughters, Kelly Fernandez of La Jolla, Calif., and Shannon Gustafson of Sherborn, a stepson, Stan Smith of Weston, a sister, Mary Hammer of Concord, a brother, Philip of Westport, 12 grandchildren, and one great-grandchild.

A funeral Mass will be said at 10 a.m. Thursday in Holy Family Parish in Concord. A memorial service will be announced.

Mr. Hudner will be buried Arlington National Cemetery.

At the christening of the Thomas Hudner at the General Dynamics Bath Iron Works in Maine, members of Brown's family came from Mississippi, Texas, and California to honor Mr. Hudner.

Mr. Hudner, in turn, honored his wingmate.

"He was loyal to Daisy, loyal to the squadron, loyal to the naval service. . . . In return, people were very loyal to him," Hudner said in an interview. "When I was a boy, my father gave me some advice that he'd learned running his grocery stores with employees from all walks of life: 'A person's actions will reveal his character, not his skin color.'

"I took this to heart."

In addition to the Medal of Honor, Mr. Hudner was awarded a Bronze Star and Legion of Merit, among other honors. Throughout his life, though, he continued to downplay the glory that had come his way.

The men he'd served with "would do anything for one another," he said in one interview. Many more likely deserved medals, too, he added, even though the public had never heard of them. "All these guys have stories. The music may be different, but it's all the same story."

Emily Sweeney of Globe staff contributed to this obituary.

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