

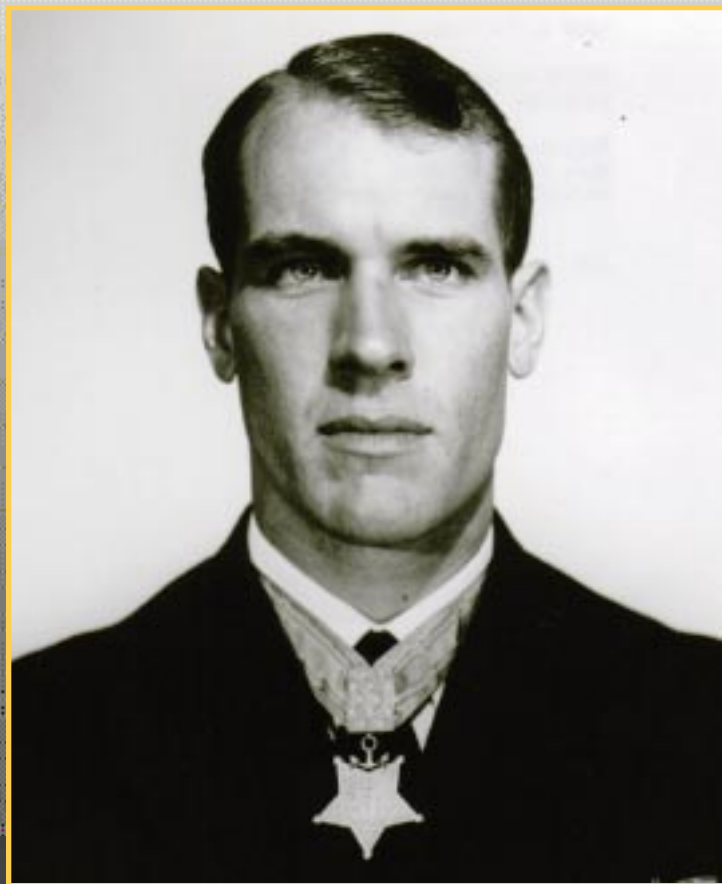
Medal of Honor Series



Valor in the Frozen Chosin

By Tim Frank

Lieutenant (jg) Thomas J. Hudner was flying a routine armed reconnaissance mission with Fighter Squadron 32 in North Korea on 4 December 1950 when a member of his flight, Ensign Jesse Brown—the first African American nonpilot to complete Navy flight training and be designated a Naval Aviator—radioed that he had lost power and was forced to land. Brown survived the crash landing, but those circling overhead saw that he was not exiting his F4U *Corsair* in spite of smoke coming from under the cowling. Concerned that Brown's plane might catch fire while awaiting a rescue helicopter, Hudner acted on the decision the other pilots were contemplating—a decision that earned him the nation's highest award for valor, the Congressional Medal of Honor.



Ltjg. Thomas J. Hudner



Thomas Hudner was born on 31 August 1924 in Fall River, Mass., and at a young age began to consider the Navy as a career. He entered the Naval Academy in 1943, in the midst of WW II, and graduated in 1946, just months after war's end.

Hudner's first taste of Naval Aviation came soon after graduation when he and his classmates attended a short flight orientation at NAS Jacksonville, Fla. A year and a half later, after several nonaviation assignments, he requested flight training. Ordered to Pensacola, Fla., in April 1948, he received his wings at Corpus Christi, Texas, in August 1949.

Later that year Ltjg. Hudner was

assigned to VF-32 at Naval Air Station, Quonset Point, R.I., to fly the F4U *Corsair*. Shortly after reporting aboard, Hudner met Ens. Jesse Brown: "I first met Jesse in the locker room when I was changing for a flight. He was a friendly person, someone who right away was the type of person you knew you would like. The story has it that ever since he was a kid, he wanted to fly."

Hudner remembers the start of the Korean War as if it were yesterday: "Sunday, the 25th of June, 1950, my squadron was aboard *Leyte* (CV 32) on a routine cruise in the Mediterranean. We were anchored off Cannes, France, and in



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the middle of the afternoon someone came running into the junior officers' bunk room and said, 'North Korea has just invaded South Korea.' We weren't even sure where Korea was at the time." Soon Hudner would have the taste of combat that he and his classmates had missed with their postwar entry into the service.

On 4 December, Hudner recalled, "a flight of six VF-32 aircraft was given an assignment of armed recon around the Chosin Reservoir. We were to fly in the vicinity of our troops and hit any target of opportunity. We took off from the ship about 1300, and the first I knew of Jesse's trouble was when he came over the radio." Brown reported that he had been hit and was losing oil pressure.

The flight leader told Hudner to look around for a crash landing site, but Brown had already seen one and headed towards it. Hudner recalled, "I went over with him a checklist of the things he should do, such as opening the canopy of his aircraft. When he did land, it was without power so he did not have much control. He hit with such force that the fuselage buckled at the cockpit and his canopy was slammed shut because of the force of the landing. We didn't think there was any possibility of survival because of the

Leyte (CV 32) prepares for combat operations against North Korean forces in the Sea of Japan.

condition of the airplane. After circling several times, we noticed that he had opened the canopy and was waving at us to let us know he was alive, but he did not get out of the cockpit." The flight leader climbed to altitude and radioed the Marines for a helicopter.

Hudner knew that someone had to act fast. He said, "By now, there was smoke coming out from under the cowling of Jesse's airplane and we did not know its source. I made a decision—since Jesse did not get out of the airplane—to make a crash landing near him, pull him out of the cockpit and wait for the helicopter." While the plan was simple enough, Hudner would soon learn the gravity of the situation on the ground.

He remembered, "I made a



Ens. Jesse Brown flew F8F Bearcats with VF-32 before the squadron's transition to F4U Corsairs.

wheels-up, flaps-down landing, probably 100 yards from him. I had expended all of my rockets and external fuel tank to make the airplane as light as I could. After landing, I went through the foot-deep snow and I saw when I got to the cockpit the reason Jesse did not get out. Because of the way the plane buckled, it caught his leg in between the side of the fuselage and a hydraulic control panel under the instrument panel. It pinned him in so that he could not move. I was not able to do anything.”

Hudner returned to his aircraft and called for the helicopter to bring a fire extinguisher and an ax. “There was nothing else I could think of,” he recalled. “The helicopter arrived with a fire extinguisher, which was of no use. I couldn’t get to the source of the smoke and the ax just bounced off the fuselage. The helicopter pilot and I worked for about a half hour. The work was very difficult because the cockpit was high enough off the ground that anything we did was over our heads, so we had to climb up the wings and straddle the cockpit. The way the snow was packed to the bottom of our boots was just like walking on ice.”

Although Brown was drifting in and out of consciousness, Hudner kept talking to him. “There was absolutely no panic in his voice. His attitude was one of resignation. His manner gave me inspiration.” Brown’s hands were frozen, and he was not dressed for warmth; at one point, Hudner put his watch cap on Jesse to try to keep him comfortable. “It was very difficult for me to believe that he could be so calm under those circumstances.”

Despite their efforts, Hudner and the helicopter pilot could not free Brown. As darkness approached, the pilot explained that his helicopter was not equipped to operate at night, and

he would have to leave. Faced with a difficult decision, Hudner decided to fly out with the other pilot. “It was obvious there was nothing further I could do. Jesse, I felt, was probably more dead than alive at the time. I’m guessing the temperatures at night were around minus 35° F, and he couldn’t have survived long.”

Looking back on that day, Hudner said, “There was tremendous *esprit de corps* among all of us there, spirit which I hope still exists in the military services. A lot of us would have done almost anything for another who needed help. I admit I took the initiative, but there were a lot of people who were seriously considering the same thing.”

On 13 April 1951, President Harry Truman presented Hudner with the Congressional Medal of Honor, the first awarded for actions in Korea. “It was very informal. My family and I were at the White House at 0830, and we waited for the president in the

Cabinet Room. He came in and chatted for a while, then we went down into the Rose Garden and the president read the citation and put the medal around my neck. He said a few things, and that was it.” Jesse Brown’s widow, Daisy, was also present at the ceremony.

Retiring as a captain on 1 March 1973, Hudner is now the commissioner of veteran’s affairs for the state of Massachusetts, where he continuously works to improve the situation of veterans of all wars. Although he does not like to be called a hero, Capt. Hudner embodies the spirit of valor and sacrifice that the Medal of Honor represents.



Mr. Frank is a student at Catholic University in Washington, D.C., studying history.

This article begins a series honoring Naval Aviation’s Medal of Honor recipients.



Ltjg. Thomas J. Hudner was presented the Congressional Medal of Honor by President Harry Truman on 13 April 1951.