



MEDIA RELEASE

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Congress Awards Gold Medal to American Fighter Aces *Medal to ensure nation never forgets aviator heroes*

SEATTLE, May 20, 2015 — Congressional leaders came together Wednesday to offer the thanks of a grateful nation and bestow Congress' highest civilian honor on the 1,447 aviators who earned the distinction of being an American Fighter Ace.

Thirty-six of the 77 remaining American Fighter Aces were on-hand today in Emancipation Hall at the Capitol Visitor Center to receive the Congressional Gold Medal. To become a "Fighter Ace" a pilot must have shot down at least five enemy aircraft in air-to-air combat.

"These outstanding military Aces are the best of the best," Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV) told an audience of 500 gathered to celebrate the Aces accomplishments. Manchin and Senator Jim Inhofe (R-OK) introduced the Senate Bill to honor the Aces. "Their patriotism, valor and bravery know no bounds. We thank all of our Fighter Aces and their families who are gathered here today. This nation owes them a debt of gratitude."

"Fighter Aces are rare," said Texas Representative Sam Johnson (R-TX), also a former military pilot. "While over 60,000 fighter pilots have taken to the air, less than 1,500 have earned the distinction of Ace."

Johnson explained that while he did not reach the distinction of being an Ace, he is honored to have served with some of the nation's Fighter Aces. He co-sponsored the House legislation with Congressman Denny Heck (D-WA).

"Today they are rightfully honored for their exemplary service to our country," Johnson said. "This gold medal will ensure we never forget these heroes who defended our freedoms."

Said House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), "As we celebrate our Fighter Aces so close to Memorial Day, we also salute the Aces who are no longer with us."

While the stories of American Fighter Aces will live on at Seattle's Museum of Flight, their numbers are dwindling, adding urgency to the efforts to recognize their importance to American history. The Museum of Flight spearheaded the effort to get as many living Aces as possible to Washington D.C. for today's ceremony. Of the 77 remaining Aces still alive, the oldest Ace is 104 years old and the youngest Ace is 72.

"The American Fighter Aces achieved a level of aviation excellence for our nation when it mattered most," said Doug King, President and CEO of The Museum of Flight in Seattle. "We're proud to play our part in honoring them and join our members of Congress in saluting them."

“What an honor it is to welcome these living legends to the United States Capitol,” said Speaker of the House John Boehner, “This medal is meant to honor the feats these men achieved and the sacrifices their families made to keep the skies – and the world – safe for democracy.”

The ceremony comes a year after Congress unanimously passed legislation to recognize the Aces. The legislation was signed into law by the President of the United States May 23, 2014.

Seattle’s Museum of Flight is home to the American Fighter Aces Association (AFAA) and an extensive collection of artifacts, documents and exhibits that tell the legendary stories of the Fighter Aces. It supports more than 700 “Friends” of the Aces in AFAA chapters across the country who are dedicated to championing the stories of these brave pilots, preserving and sharing their legacy.

“Because wars are fought differently today, the American Fighter Ace is indeed passing into history at a rapid rate,” said King. “Before today’s ceremony, our single purpose was to get as many of these living Aces as possible to Washington, D.C. for this celebration of their bravery and their lives.”

The Museum enlisted the volunteer support of more than 20 pilots and a fleet of small and mid-sized jets to fly the Aces and their families to Washington, D.C., a flight that many of the volunteer pilots are calling a true privilege and honor.

The stories of the Fighter Aces cover some of the most formative periods in aviation history. Some gained their victories in open-cockpit biplanes, others in the powerful propeller-driven fighters of the World War II, and still others in the jets that fought over Korea and Southeast Asia. Aces come from each major combat branch of the U.S. military and nearly every state in the union. A majority of the Aces still alive today earned Ace status in World War II. The last fighter pilot to receive the elite designation fought in the Vietnam War.

“My heroes when I was growing up were the Aces of World War I and World War II,” said retired Air Force Lt. Gen. Charles “Chick” Cleveland, president of the American Fighter Aces Association, addressing those gathered at the medal ceremony. “These are people who saved lives and shortened wars and I’m honored to be among them.” Cleveland is a Korean War Ace who flew F-86 Sabre jets in MiG Alley.

Attending the ceremony Wednesday was the granddaughter of one of Cleveland’s childhood heroes, Col. Francis Stanley Gabreski, USAF.

“The ceremony is a great honor for me and my family,” said Catherine Gabreski of New York. “It is a great privilege to be his granddaughter and to know he is still being honored for his great contributions and sacrifices to the nation even after his death. My grandfather believed that service to one’s country was very important and saw it as his duty to serve. To him it was part of being an American.”

While best known for the 34.5 air-to-air combat victories, Col. Gabreski is one of only seven U.S. combat pilots to become an Ace in two wars. He passed away in 2002.

In addition to the Fighter Aces, the gold medal ceremony was widely attended by family members of living and deceased Aces, as well as members of Congress, including Congressmen Derek Kilmer (D-WA) and Denny Heck (D-WA) from Washington state, home to Seattle’s Museum of Flight.

Following the ceremony, the American Fighter Aces’ gold medal will be given to the Smithsonian Institution, where it will be displayed and made available for research. Each Fighter Ace will receive a bronze replica of the medal. The Congressional Gold Medal for the Fighter Aces was designed and struck by the United States Mint.

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NOTE TO REPORTERS:

PHOTOS AVAILABLE: Images from the Gold Medal Ceremony are available at

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/zmx5txx77679o1s/AACJMHAKmpm2hnf30CS1JvsYa?dl=0>

Additional photos will be available from the same Dropbox after the reception for the Fighter Aces at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum.

Reporters interested in **interviewing any of the individuals** referenced below, should contact either Daven Rosener, daven@thekellergroup.com at (253) 307-5402 or Lee Keller, lee@thekellergroup.com, (206) 799-3805. The following individuals are available for interviews:

- Individual Aces (hailing from various states across the country)
- Doug King, President and CEO, The Museum of Flight
- Retired Air Force Lt. Gen. Charles "Chick" Cleveland, president of the American Fighter Aces Association
- Several of the volunteer pilots flying the aces to Washington, D.C. are available for interview. A schedule of flights is available upon request.

Reporters interested in interviewing Congressional Leadership members listed below should contact Heather Reed, Deputy Press Secretary in Speaker John Boehner's office, at (202) 997-4303.

About the Congressional Gold Medal

Since the American Revolution, Congress has commissioned gold medals as its highest expression of national appreciation for distinguished achievements and contributions. Each medal honors a particular individual, institution, or event. Although the first recipients included citizens who participated in the American Revolution, the War of 1812 and the Mexican War, Congress broadened the scope of the medal to include actors, authors, entertainers, musicians, pioneers in aeronautics and space, explorers, lifesavers, notables in science and medicine, athletes, humanitarians, public servants, and foreign recipients. For more information about the Congressional Gold Medal visit history.house.gov/Institution/Gold-Medal/Gold-Medal-Recipients/.

About Seattle's Museum of Flight

Celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2015, the independent, non-profit Museum of Flight, an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution, is one of the largest air and space museums in the world, serving more than 560,000 visitors annually. The Museum's collection, among the most extensive in the world, includes more than 160 historically significant airplanes and spacecraft, from the first fighter plane (1914) to today's Boeing Dreamliner. Attractions also include the original Boeing Company factory and the world's only full-scale NASA Space Shuttle Trainer. The Museum's aviation and space library and archives are the largest on the West Coast. More than 150,000 individuals are served annually by the Museum's on-site and outreach educational programs. The Museum of Flight is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums. For general Museum information about the Museum visit www.museumofflight.org.