

In “time of war,” Biden awards top medals to Vietnam veterans

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President Joe Biden took the unusual step Tuesday of awarding the top US military medal, the Congressional Medal of Honor, to four Vietnam veterans who have already received multiple awards for their military actions, and one of whom has been dead since 1967. All of the actions for which honors were distributed took place more than a half century ago, and two of the surviving recipients are in their 80s.

In order of the dates of the combat engagements for which they were honored, the four are:

Edward N. Kaneshiro: His platoon entered Phu Huu 2 village in Binh Dinh province on December 1, 1966 and came under fire from National Liberation Front (NLF) forces. The platoon commander was killed in the initial ambush, but Kaneshiro was able to suppress the initial attack with hand grenades and rifle fire and ultimately succeeded in extracting his unit. Three months later, Kaneshiro was killed in combat.

Dwight Birdwell: The tank soldier received the medal for actions on January 31, 1968, near the Saigon airport, on the first day of the Tet Offensive, the nationwide surprise attack launched by the NLF. After his tank commander was wounded and put out of action, Birdwell kept firing until his ammunition was exhausted, then continued firing with machine guns, while assisting the rescue of the wounded. He was repeatedly decorated for his actions. After the war he went to law school, became a judge in the Cherokee Nation legal system, and at one point was the tribe’s chief justice.

Dennis Fujii: The crew chief on a helicopter ambulance was shot down February 18, 1971 in Laos while evacuating wounded soldiers of the South Vietnamese army (ARVN). Another helicopter took all the survivors except Fujii, and he remained behind for four more days to treat the wounded, under constant fire, until he was rescued. This took place during the disastrous South Vietnamese invasion of Laos in February-March 1971, an operation designed to prove that ARVN had become a fighting force capable of independent action. Instead it proved the opposite—the ARVN, riddled by corruption and hated by the Vietnamese people, was incapable of standing up to the North Vietnamese and NLF forces without saturation US bombing and other support.

John J. Duffy: He was a forward air controller, responsible for calling in air strikes on exposed US and ARVN military

positions, a role that made him a key target for Vietnamese snipers. His cited actions took place during a battle April 14-15, 1972, when his commander had been killed and his command post destroyed. The 84-year-old Duffy had a long military career in the Special Forces, deployed to Vietnam four times and collected 64 decorations and medals, including 29 combat-related. He hardly needed another.

It is worth investigating the background to at least one of the awards to see what it is that the current US president is honoring and what that honor suggests about the future engagements into which the Pentagon will be dispatching millions of young Americans, mostly drawn from the working class.

Edward Kaneshiro’s platoon of the 1st Air Cavalry was engaged in a search-and-destroy mission, part of Operation Thayer II, described as a follow-on operation to Operation Thayer, launched in September 1966, part of what the Army called the “Binh Dinh Province Pacification Campaign.” According to the official military history, the aim was “to clean up, once and for all, all regular PAVN/VC units in the area as well as uprooting the long established VC infrastructure.” (The initials refer to the official US military terminology for the enemy: PAVN is People’s Army of Viet Nam, the North Vietnamese military, while VC is Viet Cong, the US term for the National Liberation Front).

Binh Dinh, a province on the central coast region of southern Vietnam, was the site of a September 3, 1966, National Liberation Front mortar attack on the 1st Air Cavalry headquarters at Camp Radcliff, which destroyed or damaged 77 out of the 400 helicopters at the base. At the time, Camp Radcliff was the largest helicopter base in the world, and the devastating NLF attack was an acute embarrassment to the Pentagon and the administration of President Lyndon Johnson. The pacification campaign was the US response.

According to the Wikipedia description of Operation Thayer:

The operation was hampered by heavy monsoon rains which impacted both American and PAVN/VC forces. In early December the decision was taken to empty the Kim Son Valley of its non-combatants and declare it

a free fire zone in which any unidentified person was considered to be a combatant and unrestricted artillery and air strikes were permitted. About 1,100 people were forced or enabled to leave the valley. Many others chose to stay, either because they were VC loyalists or refused to abandon their homes and land...

Operations Thayer, Irving, and Thayer II displaced a large number of people in Bình ??nh Province. At the end of 1966, the province had 85 refugee camps with a reported population of 129,202. Additional people displaced by the war crowded into towns and villages or lived as squatters along Highway 1. About one-third of the 875,000 people of Bình ??nh were displaced in 1966 by the war. In some instances the displacement of people by the U.S. and South Vietnam was deliberate, forcing people to leave the Kim Son and An Lao valleys and declaring them free fire zones.

While the U.S. portrayed the refugee movement as people “fleeing communism,” U.S. Department of Defense studies showed that the most important cause of refugees was US and South Vietnamese “bombing and artillery fire, in conjunction with ground operations.”

A Marine Corps report later concluded, “The influx [of refugees] has had the favorable effect of denying the VC a needed labor and agricultural force, and of decreasing the manpower base from which to impress recruits.”

An excellent source of information on such operations is the Winter Soldier Investigation into US war crimes in Vietnam, one of which took testimony from former soldiers in Detroit, Michigan, on January 31, 1971. Ex-soldier James Mackay served in the headquarters of the 1st Air Cavalry a few years after Operation Thayer II, when the unit had been deployed to another region of Vietnam, close to the border with Cambodia. He described his experiences between August and December 1970.

During this time our helicopters, our Cobra gunships, and small observation helicopters would go out on search and destroy missions more or less where they'd go out and they'd shoot anything, any structures they saw. They'd shoot all structures; they'd shoot all people, be they men, women, or children—old men, children, whether they had arms or not. They'd shoot all livestock, destroy all food. They'd destroy everything they saw that was man-made.

These operations were typical of the barbaric attacks on the rural population that were a staple of the US occupation of

southern Vietnam from 1965 to 1972. One hideous instance of such attacks was the infamous My Lai massacre of March 1968, which took place in Song My village in Quang Ngai province, the province immediately to the north of Binh Dinh on the central coast. (In postwar Vietnam, the two provinces have been combined as a larger unit called Nghia Dinh province.)

Both provinces were considered strongholds of the NLF, in part because the central highlands are so close to the coast in that region, and the guerrilla forces could easily retreat from the coastal lowlands to terrain where it was more difficult for the American forces to follow them and find them. Ambushes like that experienced by Edward Kaneshiro's platoon were one of the most frequent causes of US casualties in the war.

Biden's effort to portray the war in Vietnam as a noble cause, “to defend our nation and our values,” is a travesty. Vietnam was 8,000 miles from the United States. No Vietnamese was engaged in threatening the United States, and most Americans had never heard of Vietnam before the Kennedy administration began the US intervention in that country's civil war.

Nearly 60,000 Americans were killed in Vietnam, compared to at least two million Vietnamese. Of the Americans, one third were actual draftees, while many others were National Guard and Reserve soldiers or “volunteers” who joined a specific military service rather than be drafted and take their chances on what the Pentagon would choose to do with them.

Biden chose to honor the four Vietnam veterans, and through them, rehabilitate the war itself, only a few weeks after he signed a massive spending bill bringing total US military and economic aid to Ukraine to more than \$60 billion. The United States and its NATO allies are for all intents and purposes at war with Russia, in a conflict whose escalation could well lead to direct combat between US and Russian troops. This war will continue, according to Biden, “as long as it takes.”

Under such conditions, the White House feels it necessary to bury the collective memory of the Vietnam War, and particularly the mass popular opposition to the innumerable crimes of American imperialism which were exposed at that time. Instead, the Vietnam War is being treated as one more example of the nobility and heroism of America's military operations overseas.



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