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Civilian gets his medals

S.D. native was taken prisoner as federal firefighter in Vietnam

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K.C. Alfred / Union-Tribune

Former federal firefighter Lewis E. Meyer got a hug from his granddaughter Mia, 4, after he received two Purple Hearts and a Prisoner of War Medal at a ceremony yesterday in San Diego.



Photo by K.C. Alfred - Union-Tribune



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El Cajon resident Lewis E. Meyer, 76, saluted the crowd of about 150 people attending his medal ceremony yesterday. Meyer served as a civilian firefighter in wartime Vietnam and was held captive from 1968 to 1973. Friends and family had led the drive to recognize his heroism.

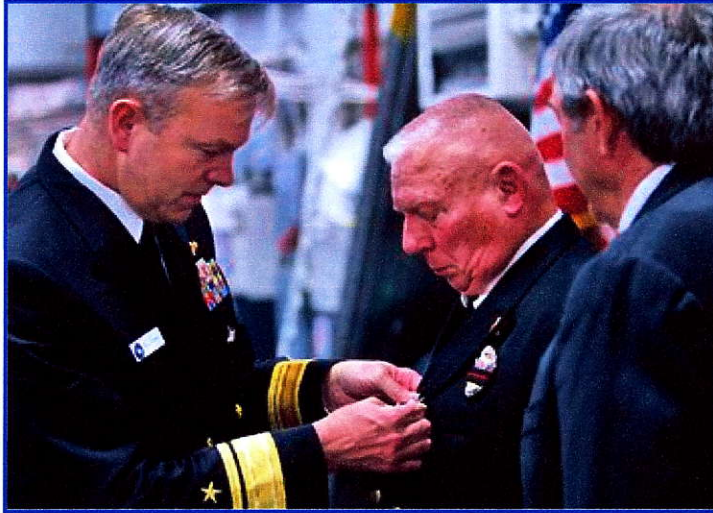


Photo by K.C. Alfred - Union-Tribune

Lewis E. Meyer was awarded three military medals yesterday, two Purple Hearts and a Prisoner of War Medal, during the ceremony on the Midway. Navy Rear Adm. William French pinned the medals; former Rep. Duncan Hunter (right) attended.

Lewis E. Meyer put out fires. He didn't start them.

So after he came home from Vietnam in 1973 as a civilian firefighter who had been caught up in the war there, he didn't complain about the government not honoring his service and sacrifice.

It didn't much matter to him that no Purple Heart arrived, or that nobody gave him a Prisoner of War Medal. He knew what he had been through.

But it mattered to his friends and family, and yesterday their efforts to right a wrong paid off with a ceremony aboard the USS Midway Museum in downtown San Diego. In front of about 150 people, the 76-year-old El Cajon resident stood in his dress firefighter's uniform and couldn't stop smiling as Rear Adm. William French pinned the medals on him.

"I am so proud to be here," Meyer said after audience members rose from their seats on the hangar deck to give him an ovation. "You don't have to be in the military to serve and defend your country. That's the duty of all of us."

Meyer, a San Diego native who was in the Army during the Korean War, had already worked for 14 years in the federal fire service when he was ordered to South Vietnam in early 1968 to help train air-crash-suppression crews.

A few weeks into his stint, the North Vietnamese army and the Viet Cong attacked his building compound in Hue during the Tet Offensive. Meyer was wounded, then captured after three days of fighting.

He spent five years as a POW at a place called Rockpile. He escaped once with two other men, but

was recaptured days later. Prison officials interrogated and tortured him dozens of times.

Meyer said he doesn't remember much about the torture because during those times, he would train his mind to block out the pain by taking him elsewhere.

"I always went to Hawaii," he said.

The prisoners joked at times about going on a hunger strike. "But we were already hungry," said Meyer, who lost 60 pounds in captivity.

In March 1973, after the Vietnam peace pacts were signed in Paris, Meyer was among hundreds of American prisoners released.

One of his supervisors put in paperwork for the medals later that year, Meyer said. It got lost, bounced from the Army to the Navy and then into a who-knows-where limbo.

Meyer went back to civilian life, to his wife and two sons and fire career. But it wasn't an easy transition. His family said he was different, scarred and edgy. He eventually was divorced.

"For the first few years, we had to be careful not to slam any doors around him," his brother Bill said.

About four years ago, Meyer turned to face the demons still chasing him. He got counseling through the Department of Veterans Affairs. He started opening up with those around him about what he had been through.

One of his friends is Dean Erwine, a retired Air Force colonel. They've known each other for 60 years, since junior high. It bothered Erwine that Meyer hadn't received his medals.

Erwine compiled witness statements from men who were at Hue or Rockpile with Meyer. He wrote letters and made phone calls.

"We hit a bureaucratic cement wall," Erwine said. "First they told us he needed to be attached to a particular military unit to get the medals. Then they said he wasn't eligible because he was a civilian."

Eventually, Meyer's supporters contacted Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Alpine, and Ross Perot, the wealthy Texas businessman and two-time candidate for president. Both intervened.

In November, Erwine heard through his military contacts that the medals had been approved — two Purple Hearts (one for wounds at Hue, the other for injuries during captivity) and the POW Medal.

He remembers calling Meyer and asking, "Lew, are you sitting down?"

Yesterday's ceremony had the kind of sweetness in the air normally associated with graduations and weddings. Everybody smiled and took pictures and hugged. Tears of joy fell.

Relatives and friends mingled with firefighters and former POWs, including one who flew in from Thailand.

"This is a great moment of closure to see him finally rewarded for his heroism," said Jeff Meyer, his youngest son, who was 12 when his dad was captured. "I always knew he was a hero. Now everybody knows."

After he received the medals, Meyer told the crowd, "I'm speechless." But he wasn't. He talked about how honored he felt. He talked about supporting the troops fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

And he talked about opening old wounds, and how he was OK with that — at last.

"I finally came out of my cell," Meyer said. "I'm home."

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