

U.S. Navy World War II Congressional Medal of Honor Recipient Lt. John William Finn



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In the past, visitors to NTC may have passed by building 485 and noticed it was called "John Finn Hall." The "T"-shaped building, located at the southeast section of Farragut Court, was a technical training building for recruits and SSC. The building was designed to provide approximately 1,800 recruits classroom instruction in basic seamanship, general military training, basic damage control and first aid.

Some may have wondered who John Finn was and why a building would have been named after him at NTC.

Originally built in 1970, the building was dedicated and named for him on August 1, 1986 because he was the only known living sailor to graduate from San Diego's boot camp who later received the Medal of Honor for action during World War II. The dedication ceremony also marked the 60th anniversary of Finn's enlistment in the Navy.

Finn was born on July 23, 1909 and enlisted in the navy in 1926, following his 17th birthday. Finn had to have his mother sign him up because he was so young.

"Although I was 17, I looked 12 and the 'old salts' gave me a hard time," said Finn, in a 1986 Hoist article.

Finn recalled fondly his recruit days at NTC. He said Navy brochures told him Navy food was "plain but wholesome." He thought that meant boiled potatoes and rice, both of which he hated. Imagine his surprise when the fine Navy chow served in boot camp consisted of roast beef, watermelon and fruit. "Definitely the finest Navy chow I ever ate," he recalled.

Even though he only had a grammar school education, he became an Aviation Ordnanceman and worked his way through the enlisted ranks, finally being promoted to chief petty officer in only nine years.

"Everybody thought I was a boy wonder," recalled Finn, in a June 17, 1994 Hoist article. "I was just in the right place at the right time." Finn said he was glad for the promotion to chief because in 1935 a chief petty officer earned \$99 per month and a seaman earned \$21. He said the extra money helped him and his wife Alice, to whom he married in 1932.



He received a commission in 1942 and retired as a lieutenant in 1956.

During his career, Finn served with several aircraft squadrons on USS Houston, USS Saratoga, USS Cincinnati and USS Hancock.

In 1941, Finn was stationed in Kaneohe Bay, Territory of Hawaii with VP-41 squadron. His actions in Hawaii that day put him on the map at NTC. On the morning of Dec. 7, 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, he left his quarters and manned a .50 caliber machine gun mounted in an exposed section of a parking ramp.

During the 15-minute ordeal (which he said felt like hours), he fired upon the enemy and reports indicated he had single-handedly shot down one Japanese aircraft killing the pilot.

A somewhat modest man, Finn believes the downing was the collective actions of all the men that morning, but because his gun was under heavy enemy machine gun fire and he was severely wounded, he received the Medal of Honor, our nation's highest medal.

Although Finn sustained approximately 21 wound marks throughout his body, he didn't think he was seriously wounded.

"There was shrapnel in my chest and abdomen and I spent 14 days in sick bay," he told Hoist. Nine months later, Adm. Chester Nimitz awarded Finn his Medal of Honor in ceremonies on board USS Enterprise. His citation was signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. During that ceremony, 25 other men were presented the Medal of Honor. Also in attendance was Admiral "Bull" Halsey.

In June 1942, Finn was temporarily commissioned as an Ensign, rising in rank to Lieutenant two years later. During his service as an officer, he served with Bombing Squadron 102, at several stateside training facilities and on board the aircraft carrier Hancock (CV-19). Following transfer to the Fleet Reserve in March 1947, he reverted to the enlisted rate of Chief Aviation Ordnanceman. In September 1956, he was placed on the Retired List in the rank of Lieutenant.

The Honolulu Advertiser ran a front page story and photo of Finn with Nimitz and Halsey. Nimitz was quoted as saying 'The 25 who are to receive awards today have earned them in a diversity of tasks symbolic of the Pacific Fleet's tremendous responsibilities. We all know that the whole fleet would be no less ready to rise to extraordinary occasions ... Finn's magnificent courage in the face of almost certain death helped repel the Japanese attack ... His complete disregard for his own life, in staying with his machine gun, although many times wounded, is the kind of American fighting spirit necessary to victory.'



In addition to the Medal of Honor, Finn earned the Purple Heart Medal; American Defense Service Medal, base clasp; American Campaign Medal; Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal; World War 11 Victory Medal; and the Navy Occupation Service Medal, Asia Clasp. For enlisted service, he has a Good Conduct Medal with two bronze stars.

Mary Camacho, JOC(SW)
CNSP APAO Coronado San Diego, CA.

Rank and organization: Lieutenant, U.S. Navy. Place and date: Naval Air Station, Kaneohe Bay, Territory of Hawaii, 7 December 1941. Entered service at: California. Born: 23 July 1909, Los Angeles, Calif.

CITATION:

For extraordinary heroism distinguished service, and devotion above and beyond the call of duty. During the first attack by Japanese airplanes on the Naval Air Station, Kaneohe Bay, on December 7, 1941, Lt. Finn promptly secured and manned a .50-caliber machinegun mounted on an instruction stand in a completely exposed section of the parking ramp, which was under heavy enemy machine gun strafing fire. Although painfully wounded many times, he continued to man this gun and to return the enemy's fire vigorously and with telling effect throughout the enemy strafing and bombing attacks and with complete disregard for his own personal safety. It was only by specific orders that he was persuaded to leave his post to seek medical attention. Following first aid treatment, although obviously suffering much pain and moving with great difficulty, he returned to the squadron area and actively supervised the rearming of returning planes. His extraordinary heroism and conduct in this action were in keeping with the highest traditions of the U.S. Naval Service.

John Finn received the first Medal of Honor awarded for WWII. He also holds the Purple Heart, Navy Unit Commendation, Good Conduct with 2 bars, Yangtze Service Medal, American Defense, American Campaign, Pacific Campaign, and the World War II Victory Medal.



John and Alice Finn posed this 1933 photo astride John's 1930 BMW motorcycle