

## Montgomery man among fighter pilots honored

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WASHINGTON – The 1,447 military pilots who earned the title "fighter ace," including retired Air Force Lt. Gen. Charles Cleveland of Montgomery, were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal on Wednesday in a ceremony on Capitol Hill.

Cleveland, president of the American Fighter Aces Association, joined congressional leaders on stage to accept the medal on behalf of the 75 aces who are still living and the descendants of those who are not.

Fighter pilots from World War I, World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War had to down at least five enemy aircraft to become an ace.

"Generations of Americans have been shaped by your leadership, humbled by your patriotism and energized by your valor," said House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif.

Cleveland, 87, was an Air Force pilot in the Korean War and later became commander of Air University at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery. Known as "Chick," Cleveland said after the ceremony that he felt pressure to secure the Congressional Gold Medal before more aces passed away.

It took three years of lobbying to get Congress to sign off on the medal.

"I'm on cloud nine, seventh heaven. I feel great," Cleveland said as fellow aces gathered around him.

The original gold medal minted for the ceremony will be on display at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum in Washington. The aces and their families will receive bronze replicas.

Wednesday's rousing ceremony in Emancipation Hall at the Capitol Visitors Center included speeches by Democratic and Republican leaders of Congress. Each spoke about the heroism shown by aces from their respective states.

"That is why we award this medal to these men. It celebrates not just what they did, but how they did it, with daring, with devotion to live what Teddy Roosevelt called 'the strenuous life,'" said House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio. "It reaffirms that nothing worth fighting for ever comes easy. And it embodies the thanks of a grateful nation."

The members of Congress who sponsored the legislation awarding the medal were Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., and Rep. Sam Johnson, R-Tex.

Cleveland said the youngest living ace is a 72-year-old Vietnam veteran, and the oldest is a World War II Marine pilot who is 104.

"All these veterans had an outsized impact on the air war they fought and therefore had an outsized impact on the outcome of the war," Cleveland said. "They are people who saved lives and shortened wars."

Advertiser staff writer Rebecca Burylo contributed to this story