

Surrounded by family, retired Navy Capt. Tom Hudner Jr., left, and his wife Georgea unveil a plaque memorializing his receiving the Medal of Honor in Concord center.

Town honors Navy hero

By Cheryl Lecesse
Staff Writer

While talking to a reporter, retired Navy Capt. Tom Hudner Jr. was interrupted by a man he didn't know.

The man, a member of the Concord Independent Battery, just wanted to shake Hudner's hand congratulate him for the honor the town was about to bestow.

"Thank you for serving our country," he said, before carefully straightening the medal on the end of the blue ribbon hanging around Hudner's neck.

The gesture was repeated countless times Saturday morning as residents gathered to honor Hudner, a Medal of Honor recipient for his actions during the Korean War, by dedicating a plaque memorializing his achievement near the Veterans Memorial in the center of town.

The plaque and dedication ceremony were the joint effort of the town and the Rotary Club.

"I was overwhelmed by the whole thing, and really gratified just to see everybody there," Hudner said in a phone interview Monday. "I'm really proud of those people who were there and felt great about what they had to say."

On Dec. 4, 1950, Hudner intentionally crash landed his plane after watching Ens. Jesse Brown crash in snowy North Korea. Hudner waited to be rescued in sub-zero temperatures, doing what he could to make his fellow pilot comfortable. Brown had serious injuries and could not be saved. But Hudner's choice earned him the first Navy Medal of Honor for actions during the Korean War, which President Harry S. Truman awarded him in 1951.

"He thought it was the right thing to do," said Sean McCarthy, Rotary Club president, adding that Hudner's compelling story should continue to be told. "We are grateful, Tom, for the opportunity to memorialize our appreciation of your accomplishments."

"Although it was 57 years ago, we feel it is time to honor our comrade-in-arms, neighbor and friend," said Molly Bergin, mistress of ceremonies.

"He risked his life to save another," said retired Navy Rear Adm. Ray Couture. "His actions were above and beyond the call of duty."

Couture, who has known Hudner for 30 years, said his friend embodies honor, courage and commitment.

"It's a great honor for me to be here and participate," he said, turning to Hudner. "You are a hero to me — even ahead of John Wayne."

During his speech, Hudner read from a statement about the American flag, written from the flag's perspective. He said the statement perfectly expressed his feelings, especially since the dedication ceremony was held on Flag Day.

"I've always felt very strongly about what our country needs," Hudner said, in a phone interview, reminiscing about the first time he left the United States and was overseas in Shanghai when he and his fellow servicemen saw an American flag flying above a ship in the busy harbor.

"We almost choked with pride because of what it signified," he said.

"It's vitally important for us to recognize the heroic events that are part of our military tradition," said Col. Robert Dominguez, commander of the 350th Electronic Systems Wing at Hanscom Air Force Base.

Dominguez said the ceremony not only commemorates Hudner's actions, but also calls attention to those of other dedicated servicemen and women in the country and overseas.

“It just gave me that much more pride for having served my country,” Hudner said of the dedication ceremony, adding his thanks to the town, the Rotary Club and the veterans who worked hard on the project. “Like a lot of our group I feel very strongly that we represent one hell of a lot of people doing a lot for our country ... I happen to be in a very high visibility position, and I think the way I feel about America and what we’re trying to do reflects what so many of those people think and feel.”