

Class of 1947

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Thomas Hudner was born in 1942 in Fall River, Massachusetts and was in high school at Phillips Academy in Andover when America entered World War II. He entered the Naval Academy in 1943, graduating in three years. At the Academy, Hudner excelled in football, lacrosse and track. The *Lucky Bag* noted that Midshipman Hudner was “an expert in adjusting slipsticks to precision accuracy.”

After graduation, Hudner served as a junior officer aboard *USS Helena* and as Crypto Watch Officer on the staff of Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet. His next step was flight training at Pensacola and Corpus Christi, earning his wings in 1949. He was assigned to VF 32 aboard *USS Leyte Gulf* which was soon in the thick of action in the Korean War in 1950. Lieutenant j.g. Hudner flew 27 combat missions in four months during the winter of 1950-51.

On the afternoon of December 4, 1950, one of Hudner's squadron mates, Ensign Jesse Brown, was shot down in mountainous terrain near the Chosin Reservoir. Circling the wreckage, Hudner saw that Ensign Brown, the first African American pilot in the Navy, had somehow survived the impact, but didn't get out of his plane which appeared to be on fire. Reacting quickly, Hudner radioed, “I'm going in,” and proceeded to crash land his own plane on a mountainside near his friend. Ensign Brown was hopelessly pinned in the wreckage and rapidly losing consciousness. A rescue helicopter finally arrived, but it was too late. Although Ensign Brown died, America's first black naval aviator did not die alone; his friend was at his side. For his brave effort to save a fallen comrade, Hudner received the Congressional Medal of Honor from President Harry Truman, a ceremony witnessed by Jesse's widow, Daisy.

After a tour at Corpus Christi as an instrument flight instructor, Hudner joined the staff of Commander, Carrier Division 3 in 1953, then returned stateside in 1955. In each successive assignment, Hudner was able to realize his dream of flight. He served in the Bureau of Weapons, with an Air Force interceptor squadron, on the Staff of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and in the Office of Naval Operations. He attended the Air War College and his last sea duty was Executive Officer of *USS Kitty Hawk* during the Vietnam War.

In addition to the Medal of Honor, Hudner has received the Legion of Merit, two Air Medals, Bronze Star, Navy Commendation Medal and the Presidential Unit Citation. In retirement, he has remained active in the arena of veterans' affairs, serving as Commissioner of Veteran's Services for the state of Massachusetts.

Hudner enjoys family life with his wife, Georgia. His large family includes a son, three step-children, a grandchild and nine step-grandchildren.

Hudner is justifiably proud of his efforts to make the military services open and accessible to all, without regard to race, color or creed. He continues to work to spread that philosophy to our Nation at large. His sense of brotherhood and devotion to his comrades set the finest examples and indeed, “sustained and enhanced the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.”